Archivaria
The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists

Oral History, Donor Engagement, and the Cocreation of Knowledge in an Academic Archives

ROBERT G. WEAVER and ZACHARY R. HERNÁNDEZ

Cite this article:

Oral History, Donor Engagement, and the Cocreation of Knowledge in an Academic Archives

ROBERT G. WEAVER AND
ZACHARY R. HERNÁNDEZ

ABSTRACT This article examines attempts at the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University's Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library (SWC/SCL), in Lubbock, Texas, to integrate its oral history program into collection acquisition, arrangement, description, and discovery processes. Beginning with the creation of a staff position dedicated to acquisition, and continuing through an evolution of job duties resulting from COVID-19, the SWC's oral historians now not only facilitate collection acquisition through extensive relationship building but also engage donors during arrangement and description. Such reconceptions have led to new processes and workflows, wherein oral history has become an endeavour of collaborative knowledge creation and an enabler of a more democratic archives.

RÉSUMÉ Cet article examine les démarches entreprises par la *Southwest Collection* de la *Texas Tech University's Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library* (SWC/SCL), à Lubbock, au Texas, pour intégrer son programme d'histoire orale aux processus d'acquisition, de classement, de description et de découverte des collections. Débutant par la création d'un poste dédié à l'acquisition, suivi par l'évolution des tâches résultant de la COVID-19, les historiens oraux du SWC facilitent dorénavant non seulement l'acquisition de la collection en établissant des relations étroites avec les donateurs, mais impliquent également ces derniers lors du classement et de la description. De telles reconceptions ont conduit à de nouveaux processus et flux de travail, dans lesquels l'histoire orale est devenue une entreprise de création de connaissances collaborative et un levier pour des archives plus démocratiques.

Introduction

Moments after an SWC archivist turned off their voice recorder following a 2012 oral history interview with Dr. Sherman Vinograd – NASA's 1960s chief of medical science – Dr. Vinograd asked, "What do you do with these recordings, anyway?"[1] The archivist provided the SWC's standard talking points, emphasizing the value of oral history to researchers and the historical record and the vectors through which SWC staff make them discoverable. However, driving away from the doctor's home, they began to wonder: Is there something more the archives could accomplish through the practice of oral history?

The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library (SWC/SCL) at Texas Tech University (TTU) in Lubbock, Texas, has a 60-year history of conducting oral history interviews. The institution has accumulated over 6,000 oral histories, abstracted a large portion of the collection, and transcribed several hundred interviews. The archives even dedicates a faculty position to accumulating oral histories. Yet the SWC, like many academic archives, gathered this trove of personal stories almost entirely without a formalized articulation of oral history's ability to help acquire, arrange, and describe collections. Historically, SWC archivists accumulated and housed oral histories separate from archival documents and related media.

Mere feet from our second-floor oral history offices lie the Southwest Collection's stacks, which contain tens of thousands of linear feet of material, including over 2,400 arranged and described archival collections. Since the archives' earliest oral history acquisition efforts, interviews have acted as opportunities to fill information gaps among these holdings. Oral histories added narratives from donors and individuals whose lives and careers touched on related archival collections. Yet archivists rarely integrated oral histories as part of the SWC's manuscript collections, in part because most oral histories were recorded long before or long after SWC archivists and staff arranged and described the related collection(s). In some instances, oral history interviews remained invisible to the archivists authoring and publishing finding aids. Connecting recordings back to existing collections was possible, but in the

---

1   Sherman Vinograd, "Oral History Interview," interview by Robert Weaver, General Southwest Collection Interviews (Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University, July 14, 2012), https://swco-ir.tdl.org/handle/10605/358992.

shelve-it-and-move-on reality of a large and continuously collecting archives such as the SWC, it was increasingly unlikely.

On the drive back from the visit with Dr. Vinograd, and during ensuing trips by other interviewing staff, strategies for incorporating donors' oral perspectives into collections became a cornerstone of discussion and consideration. Could oral histories engage with arrangement and description in "real time"? Furthermore, what would be the advantages and limitations of incorporating oral history into the SWC manuscript collections? Over the next several years, SWC archivists began to sketch out, in a purely hypothetical sense, how to become cocreators of knowledge alongside donors and interviewees – how to make our internal processes less opaque and more democratic to contributors. Ensuring that aspects of our oral history program were integrated into archival processes, rather than a separate workflow within the SWC/SCL, seemed the key to bringing this nascent theory into practice.

This article examines the SWC's attempt to implement this idea. Beginning with the creation of a staff position focused on our vigorous acquisition projects and continuing through unexpected COVID-19 changes to job duties and acquisition workflows, the SWC began to integrate oral history into its other archival processes early and often. Now, oral history increasingly helps facilitate collection acquisition. Moreover, SWC archivists and staff utilize and conduct oral histories in real time alongside arrangement, description, and Encoded Archival Description (EAD) finding aid creation. Donor input into these processes no longer triggers the unique dread that, rightly or wrongly, can grip archivists working diligently on collections in the comfort of our building. Instead, it enhances description and discovery in both expected and unanticipated ways. Such reconceptions have led to new processes and workflows as well as a still-emerging conception of the oral historian as archivist. Oral history has, in short, become a generator of collaboration, both within and outside of the archives.

Discussion of the Role of Oral History in Archives

While oral history remains a growing field, and its implications remain a pertinent aspect of history and cultural studies journals, there remains a dearth of literature within archives-centric publications on the role of oral history within academic archives. Moreover, few published articles focus on

the methodological and practical implications of integrating oral history as a vital component of archival workflows within academic archives. Nevertheless, the existing literature suggests four major roles for oral history in this context: oral histories as archival documents help fill gaps in the historical record; oral history expands manuscript collections; oral history enriches finding aids for researchers; and oral history democratizes the information profession.

Scholarly journals have explored oral history's utility for at least a half century. James Fogerty's "Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives," for instance, argues that recording oral histories is a prerogative for archival professionals. Oral histories, Fogerty maintains, help archivists fill gaps left by the written record. He suggests that, without oral histories, the documents that reflect the life of a donor will always present as incomplete.[2] Anne Kenney's "Retrospective and Current Oral History Projects: A Comparison," for example, artfully engages historical documents and compares them to oral histories that record the same events. Kenney uses such case studies to show how oral histories can preserve some details more accurately than documents, even if both were created years after an event had occurred.[3] In addition, Irene Cortinovis's "Augmenting Manuscript Collections through Oral History" contends that oral history has enhanced manuscript collections for decades.

Cortinovis presents rare case studies that illustrate the ways in which oral history can augment manuscript collections. Cortinovis focuses on the cataloguing of a large collection of about 500 photographs from "an early twentieth-century social reformer," noting that many of the photographs depict anonymous strikers protesting at various events. An archivist and graduate student interviewed strikers and participants and used the photographs "to awaken memories," ultimately using information from these oral history sessions to label and provide details for the photographs.[4] Oral history in this instance was an essential component of cataloguing. In addition, the interviews provided insights and details that resulted in more densely detailed descriptions of the collection. Cortinovis provides a litany of such examples, highlighting the ways

2   James E. Fogerty, "Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives," *American Archivist* 46, no. 2 (1983): 148–57.

3   Anne R. Kenney, "Retrospective and Current Oral History Projects: A Comparison," *Midwestern Archivist* 6, no. 1 (1981): 47–58.

4   Irene Cortinovis, "Augmenting Manuscript Collections through Oral History," *American Archivist* 43, no. 3 (1980): 368.

that oral history can not only supplement the historical record for researchers but also aid archivists in arranging and describing collections. However, it is Martha Jane Zachart's "The Implications of Oral History for Librarians" that most literature cites as foundational for thinking about the role of oral history in academic archives.

Zachart examines the implications for the expansion of oral history within the archival profession and posits that oral history introduces new challenges for archivists. Firstly, Zachart suggests that oral history challenges the archivist to negotiate shifts in responsibility, from the role of "expert" on acquiring and preserving primary sources to that of a professional who now engages in *creating* primary sources. Secondly, oral history creates new legal and ethical questions for archivists. Among countless other responsibilities, archivists – now acting as creators – must manage issues relating to ownership of oral histories, respecting participants' stipulations for access and use. Next, archivists face imperatives to integrate recordings and transcripts into collections. They have a responsibility, Zachart argues, to incorporate oral histories into finding aids and to include oral history archives in the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*.[5] Lastly, Zachart writes that "oral history archives offer librarians opportunity for research into the problems of retrieving information from additional storage media – tapes and transcriptions."[6] Despite these innovative suppositions, later researchers have barely touched on the topics of inquiry that Zachart handed them.

Jessica Wagner Webster and Ellen D. Swain, in separate articles, are among the few to address this gap in the literature. Webster scrutinizes the genealogy of oral history publications in the *American Archivist*, revealing the limited availability of case studies on oral history and the archive. Webster complicates the idea that oral histories necessarily fill "gaps" within archives, contending that, even as oral historians and archivists utilize these interviews to record history not captured within material documents, information professionals have failed to mobilize oral history to address the erasure of marginalized communities from the archive. Most saliently, however, Webster re-emphasizes the absence

---

5   Library of Congress, "National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," Library of Congress, 2021, accessed November 16, 2021, https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/index.html.

6   Martha Jane K. Zachart, "The Implications of Oral History for Librarians," *College and Research Libraries* 29 (March 1968): 102.

of these topics within the archival literature.[7]

Swain, on the other hand, observes that publications in archival and library journals tend to focus on oral history "in terms of digital management, in the larger context of sound archives."[8] She challenges archivists to work more closely with oral historians to advance archival practice in the digital age. Swain organizes her exploration of the role of oral history around Zachart's main points, contending that "if archives and libraries are to be relevant and responsive to the research interests of their users, they must seek out and identify the resources these users need through oral history, active collection development, and appraisal."[9] According to Swain, oral history is a valuable tool for organizing collections in the digital world. Her article serves as a key source text for research and writing related to oral history and academic archives. It alone explicitly builds on the foundations laid by Zachart, becoming a springboard for further publications on oral history within library and archival journals.

Swain and Webster have picked up the threads left by Cortinovis, Fogerty, and Zachart and have provided wider avenues for considering the location of oral history within the research archive. While all these authors provide invaluable insights, they also insist that archival scholars must pay more attention to the location of oral history within the profession. Swain's "Remembering Alma Mater: Oral History and the Documentation of Student Culture" illustrates what oral history may add to the archivist's practice:

> An oral history project can have an immensely positive impact on the
> entire archives operation. The University of Illinois Archives' invest-
> ment in an alumni oral history project not only added invaluable and
> unique documentation to the Archives' holdings, but also benefited
> more traditional archival duties such as collection development,
> user service, and outreach in unsuspected and far-reaching ways.[10]

---

7   Jessica Wagner Webster, "'Filling the Gaps': Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in *The American Archivist*, 1938–2011," *American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (2016): 254–82.

8   Ellen D. Swain, "Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century," *American Archivist* 66, no. 1 (2003): 142.

9   Swain, "Oral History," 158.

10   Ellen D. Swain, "Remembering Alma Mater: Oral History and the Documentation of Student Culture," *Archival Issues* 26, no. 2 (2002): 129.

Swain's assessment emphasizes how oral history projects can ultimately lead to an increase in archival patrons, amplify an archives' visibility on a campus or within a local community, and help archivists establish and nurture relationships with both donors and patrons. Swain places a heavy emphasis on the value of human relationships, situating oral history as a vital resource within an archivist's toolbox. More so, Swain's project demonstrates that archives are already starting to implement oral history as an intimate aspect of archival work.

SWC Collection Acquisition and Oral History: Background

Over the last 60 years, the SWC/SCL has accumulated over 6,000 oral histories in a variety of media, from reel-to-reel and magnetic tape to current high-definition, digital audio recording formats. Throughout the decades, however, archivists have acquired oral histories without having a formalized articulation of their ability to help acquire, arrange, and describe collections. Seen as separate from "actual" archival documents and other media, oral histories were gathered, registered, "processed" through abstraction and transcription, and housed separately from other archival units, including the Southwest Collection (SWC) unit itself – even though it was the unit that had identified the bulk of the potential interviewees.

The SWC curates over 2,400 arranged and described archival collections, which total tens of thousands of linear feet, alongside an even greater quantity of unprocessed material. Those processing these collections viewed oral history as, at best, a side project of the unit. Oral history remained primarily the province of a dedicated oral history department, which was external to all other archival units. The library's oral history collection filled information gaps within and between archival collections, but the various collections designated them as a separate type of information object. The interviews might add colour to collection topics, but archivists and oral historians often created and described oral histories in isolation from other archival materials. Temporal distance between the arrangement and description of a collection and the gathering of related oral histories exacerbated this separation. Oral historians often conducted oral history interviews long before and separately from appraisal and acquisition processes. Even worse, some interviews were conducted years after a collection became available to patrons. This almost ensured that archivists would

never enfold the oral history information into the <relatedmaterial> element of an EAD finding aid or link it via other SWC access points. In short, because of isolation from and infrequent collaboration with the oral history unit, oral histories could create as many information gaps as they filled.

The archivists and oral historians of the SWC/SCL recognized these facts. However, given their limited resources, department heads decided that swiftly acquiring collections took precedence over methodically integrating oral history into acquisitions or finding aid writing. For example, the SWC archivist had, for many years, emphasized a "people first" philosophy, reminding archivists of the importance of developing real, lasting connections with donors – something that would consistently remind both donors and archivists within the department of the value of the stories we preserve. This philosophy thrived in the endless rush to acquire new materials but provided little time to aggregate information on almost-daily acquisitions and much less on those accessioned months or years prior. Consequently, SWC staff and faculty carved out small bits of time to experiment with oral history. This outreach could do more than cultivate relationships with donors; it could become a mechanism to facilitate the cocreation of knowledge by donors and archivists during the subsequent arrangement and description. In turn, the interior workings of the archives would become more transparent and, concurrently, our processes would become more democratic.

Oral History Processes

The first step was to delineate how current SWC/SCL oral history processes function. These processes are no doubt familiar to any institution that organizes even small-scale oral history projects. The SWC/SCL's five archival units funnel contacts to our oral historians or attempt to conduct oral history interviews themselves. The interview process either starts with a cold call (or email) or comes about as a natural evolution of unrelated conversations with prospective interviewees. While some interviewers chat with interviewees before scheduling a formal sit-down, it is more common – given the volume of pending oral histories – to schedule an interview date and time and then conduct research on potential interview topics prior to that date. Oral and field historians provide biographical and genealogical questions to interviewees to prompt thoughts about what they might want to share, with topical questions included as needed.

Whenever possible, the interviewee receives a consent/release form well before the interview although, on occasion, interviewers bring the forms to the interviews themselves. Once signed, these forms ensure that patrons can obtain the recorded interviews and their transcripts.

The next step is meeting with the interviewee in person or – as was more and more the case during the COVID-19 pandemic – calling the subject for a phone interview; pressing "record" on the chosen electronic recording device; and having a semi-structured conversation. Once the interviewee and interviewer feel that the session has ended, the SWC/SCL audiovisual (AV) unit, which serves as the custodian for the majority of in-house-created audio media, files and registers the digital recording along with the signed release form. At this point, abstraction and transcription begin.[11] Most of those who conduct oral histories review the completed transcripts for typographical errors, regional dialect, or spelling distinctions. The interviewer then provides the transcript to the interviewee, who can choose to review it and provide additional notes. This last review step often includes a meeting between interviewer and interviewee to clarify outstanding issues. Finally, the AV unit makes transcripts available on the SWC/SCL's digital collections site.[12]

Although archivists have enhanced and streamlined this workflow, the AV unit has taken a more direct hand in formalizing the transcription and curation of oral histories over the last ten years. However, the separation, at SWC, between oral history and manuscript arrangement and description has operated largely unchanged since at least the early 1970s. On a handful of occasions, the AV unit and SWC departments worked cooperatively on special projects, but it was not until the COVID-19 pandemic forced work-from-home policies at TTU that we found time to rethink this process.

---

[11] The SWC/SCL's AV unit oversees the transcription and curation of oral histories for all departments in the building. Student assistants produce the first drafts of transcripts. The AV unit manager trains students to transcribe the interviews word for word, leaving out stutters and filler sounds such as "um." Students highlight passages and words that are inaudible or unclear. SWC/SCL faculty or staff members then review each transcript before forwarding it to the interviewee. Interviewees review the transcripts for spelling, mistakes, and clarification. Lastly, the interviewer responds to their notes and corrections before the AV unit posts the transcript online. The SWC/SCL largely follows the guidelines and best practices established by the Oral History Association. Oral History Association, "Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices," Oral History Association, accessed October 20, 2021, https://www.oralhistory.org/archives-principles-and-best-practices-complete-manual/.

[12] Texas Tech University Southwest Collection, "Oral History Interviews," Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, accessed May 4, 2021, https://swco-ir.tdl.org/handle/10605/234.

With the advent of COVID-19, oral historians throughout the profession have had to revisit their methodologies and technologies.[13] Yet at the SWC/SCL, the oral historian faculty position has been vacant for some time. This void gave the SWC's manuscript unit leeway to repurpose some of the hours that would usually be dedicated to collection retrieval, processing, and maintenance to instead examine the role of oral history within the department. Collaborating with our AV unit, we explored how to conduct oral history interviews during a pandemic. A focus of this discussion was the tension between the desire to capture the historic moment versus the necessity of placing participants and their well-being at the centre of such projects.[14] Ultimately, we decided to steer away from topics that might ask participants to relive recent trauma.

We also did not want to ask participants who were already burdened with quarantine restrictions to allow us access to their homes, physically or virtually. Therefore, we began exploring technologies and best practices for conducting interviews as safely and ethically as possible. While oral historians have utilized a variety of tools to conduct long-distance interviews for decades, the SWC needed to make itself more comfortable than ever with the equipment available. Video-call applications such as Zoom and Skype presented proprietary issues and introduced an additional stress related to video applications. Some participants do not feel comfortable with video recordings for various reasons. Moreover, the question of whether rights to recorded video calls were retained in part by the technology providers remains unanswered. Another issue was the cumbersome process of ensuring interviewees had access to and familiarity with the Internet and video-call applications. Therefore, despite the limitations on sound quality imposed by telephone recordings, we began with telephone calls. Initially, the interviewer placed a Tascam DR-100mkII recorder (the recorder that the SWC/SCL issues for all oral history sessions) near their phone or laptop speakers and started recording.

However, the acquisitions field representative noticed that these recordings, no different from land-line speakerphones, exhibited other limitations. For instance, room noise and reverberation were prevalent. While oral history is often a messy practice, recordings needed to be as clear as possible. Speakerphones were easy

---

and convenient but required an extra level of impersonal mediation that created obstacles. Body language and eye contact matter in oral history interviews, serving to guide and loosen the conversation. Without them, communication technology had to pick up the slack. Yet many interviewees tend to be older, soft-spoken, or both. At times, they could not always hear the interviewer, nor could the interviewer hear them.

At a loss for other options, the field representative researched means to record conversations via external mic and headset set-ups. After exploring multiple phone-recording applications, they selected Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) at the recommendation of Kelly Krieger, oral historian for the Vietnam Center & Sam Johnson Archive, with whom the SWC/SCL shares a building.[15] OBS, created by Hugh "Jim" Bailey and widely used by the video-gaming community on Twitch and YouTube, allowed field representatives to record calls while wearing headsets with external microphones.[16] More importantly, OBS recorded the calls without requiring external recorders; this reduced the layers of mediation and stream-lined the recording of desktop audio and interviewees while also doing a better job of capturing the interviewer's voice. This removed many of the limitations created by speakerphone recordings. The use of OBS made distance interviews effortless, and the acquisitions field representative began recording six to eight interviews a month with current and prospective donors.

Archival Processes

The SWC's manuscript workflows are industry standard. Despite the immense quantity of its unprocessed material, SWC has no formal arrangement and description queue, nor does the archives adhere to a more product, less process (MPLP) philosophy.[17] Although archivists try to complete the oldest collections

---

15   Texas Tech University, "The Oral History Project of the Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive," The Vietnam Center & Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, accessed May 4, 2021, https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/oralhistory/.

16   Hugh Bailey, interview by Pete Wilkins and Ben Green, "Creating OBS: The MOST POPULAR Streaming Software," *Gaming Careers Podcast*, accessed May 4, 2021, https://gamingcareers.com/podcasts /creating-obs-interview-with-jim/.

17   Dennis Meissner and Mark A. Green, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208–63. In brief, MPLP is an arrangement and description philosophy that eschews traditional item-, folder-, or in some cases, box-level processing in order to make archival backlogs

first, it is common for new collections to supersede the old because of the rapidity of acquisition. This catch-as-catch-can philosophy has worked well enough since midcentury to make over 2,000 collections available.

On the discovery side, the SWC is fortunate to be part of a statewide finding aid consortium, Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO). Alongside over 70 other Texas archives and cultural heritage centres, the SWC/SCL supports a website that hosts thousands of EAD-encoded finding aids, including over 1,400 of its own.[18] An ongoing, endowment-funded, legacy finding aid project – to convert over 1,000 finding aids remaining in SWC collections to EAD versions – is currently tackling a massive queue awaiting metadata input and quality assurance.

The roadblock in that project is not the creation of inventories, which students, staff, and faculty transcribe or scan into spreadsheets and convert to XML via a PowerShell script. Nor is it the creation of collection-level metadata, because the bulk of that information is found among the SWC's reference desk files or within existing OCLC records. The bottleneck occurs at the <relatedmaterial> EAD element, where SWC archivists have created an increasingly complex, inter-linked web of creator- and topic-related collections – when possible, alongside oral histories. Assisting with this related-material encoding are 1,200 already encoded finding aids and hundreds of oral history abstracts and transcripts, which are available electronically. In fact, our AV unit created a wiki displaying abstracts for nearly all oral histories conducted prior to 2000, while newer abstracts and full transcripts are housed among the SWC's digital collections.[19] An SWC archivist can search these resources to discover and link each digital object's uniform resource identifier (URI) to a finding aid. However, this retro-active inclusion cannot be thorough. No archivist has time to read one 30-plus page transcript, much less several, simply to flesh out a finding aid. Acquiring and transcribing oral history interviews is also a time-consuming process that cannot possibly keep pace with the speed at which archivists create metadata for the backlog of over 1,000 finding aids.

---

available more quickly to patrons. The SWC has a longstanding, efficient workflow that allows for folder-level description. It is supported by technology developed in house.

18   "Texas Tech University Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library," TARO: Texas Archival Resources Online, accessed May 4, 2021, https://txarchives.org/repositories/ttusw.

19   Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library Oral History Collection (wiki), accessed May 4, 2021, http://oralhistory.swco.ttu.edu/index.php?title=Main_Page.

So that is where the situation stood in 2020: oral histories might or might not result in acquisitions, were often difficult to relate to existing collections, and had no bearing on SWC arrangement and description workflows because of their separate location within the archives. They simply could not be used meaningfully to facilitate relationships with donors to shed light on the materials donors had gifted to the SWC. This was a discouraging list, but the problem of more closely interlinking the two workflows was not insurmountable. In early 2020, a series of opportunities arose that proved this.

Identifying Opportunity

In late 2019, just before unanticipated budget cuts resulting from COVID-19 curtailed hiring at TTU, the SWC created an acquisitions-focused staff position. As the acquisitions field representative position was originally conceived, its duties consisted primarily of retrieving collections from donors throughout the SWC's multi-state collecting region. The department head was focused almost exclusively on acquisition – setting aside, to some extent, the notion of appraisal and zeroing in on any acquisition that would fill gaps in existing topical areas or add new topics. The capacity of other archivists and staff members was already stretched across multiple projects. A staff member dedicated to supporting our catch-as-catch-can philosophy was vital.

Among the secondary duties for this new position was conducting oral history interviews. The SWC's oral history faculty position had been vacant for well over a year, so the only means to acquire oral histories rested in the hands of individual SWC/SCL departments. In the case of the SWC, there had been no personnel available to take on this task until the creation of the field representative position. Additionally, on an as-needed basis, the staff member in this position would arrange and describe collections and assist with encoding new and legacy XML finding aids.

The SWC department filled the position in February 2020, but after a single collection development trip in early March, travel ended due to COVID-19. During the hectic redistribution of assigned duties that accompanied an indefinite work-from-home transition, the acquisition and hands-on arrangement and description of manuscript collections were indefinitely postponed due to the pandemic. The acquisitions field representative focused on quickly producing

legacy finding aids and brainstorming ways to continue oral history interviews. With the streamlining of oral history interviewing technology described above, the acquisitions field representative began conducting oral histories within a few weeks, along with these other duties.

The SWC's archivist had provided an almost endless list of potential interviewees. Several were possible collection donors whose materials would need to be retrieved once the pandemic loosened its hold. This folded into the new position's duties a modicum of the relationship building necessary for acquisition – at first temporarily but, over time, as a required component of the role. When TTU allowed employees to return to work in early fall 2020, the SWC found itself in the unique position of having a point of contact who could combine collection and oral history acquisition, arrangement and description, and the creation of finding aid metadata into their work.

By late 2020, the opportunity this presented became apparent. The SWC could now interview donors and other individuals related to recent or ongoing processing projects in "real time," aggregating the gathered data to enhance the discoverability of its collection. Up to this point, the descriptive metadata provided to processing archivists typically consisted of snippets, provided to the registrar by the staff member who had received the collection, for entry into an accession record. Hand-scribbled notes on receiving reports and the rare, brief clarification of descriptions in accession records by donors would, months or years later, result in less-than-comprehensive biographical information. Archivists could extract an overview of the scope and content of collections from those same accession records or the arranger's notes or, in the worst case, could tease ideas out of the completed inventories. Because collections might be processed over the course of months and across multiple arrangers, however, data was inevitably lost or metamorphosed into something "good enough." This is a sad reality that every archivist winces at but accepts.

However, the changes to the acquisition field representative's duties in late 2020 meant that oral histories could now help ameliorate this reality. Interviews could facilitate more robust data acquisition as key components of collection development, and oral history could move from being almost an afterthought in EAD's <relatedmaterial> element to become a method to create truly insightful metadata. In addition, during arrangement and description, interviewers no longer had to wait for transcripts of oral histories to acquire the data. Instead, the acquisition field representative could use the recorded interview – combined

with notes taken over the course of that (often hours-long) conversation – to immediately fill gaps in the biographical statement, the scope and content, the subject headings, and other metadata elements. This became even more useful when the interview had been conducted immediately prior to, or during, the processing of a collection. In short, oral history could become an integral part of some of our collections, from start to finish.

Initial Experiments

Although the SWC had made such attempts before, they had resulted in only marginal benefits and had been long abandoned by 2020. One such project, the Jewish Community Archives, entailed conducting oral histories with members of Lubbock's Jewish population, particularly those affiliated with the newly acquired records of Lubbock's Congregation Shaareth Israel. The project produced just under a dozen interviews and a small number of archival materials, but none of these underwent concurrent transcription and collection processing. Another project centred around the papers of Dr. Tetsuya Theodore Fujita – creator of the Fujita scale for measuring the destructive potential of tornadoes – and the records of TTU's Wind Science and Engineering program. It resulted in a handful of interviews with prominent meteorological researchers but led to no cohesive acquisition and processing efforts. The key missing ingredient was a staff position dedicated to coalescing these disparate components into a successful, long-term initiative.

Hiring an acquisitions field representative enabled SWC to incorporate oral history as a fundamental part of collection development and description, which nurtured new prospects for rethinking its procedures. Yet these "new prospects" did not present as straightforward or even convenient. Not every donor could – or wanted to – be involved in every phase of the archival endeavour. Furthermore, thinking about oral history as more than primary source creation required us to venture out of traditional archival comfort zones, potentially giving up long-standing notions of intellectual control. It was necessary to find a balance between proven techniques and exciting, new possibilities. The acquisition of two sets of donor papers, which for confidentiality will be named the Donor A Papers and the Donor B Collection, were the first ventures into proving the benefits of this approach.

Donor A is a nationally recognized biochemical and molecular genetics professor and cancer researcher who has published extensively and obtained patents for numerous life-saving medical advances. The SWC began to interview Donor A while their materials were gradually being delivered to the archives and has thus far facilitated the donor's involvement in constructing a narrative for the collection. Weekly oral history sessions have allowed Donor A to comment on the nature and context of the archival materials: for example, in pre- and post-interview sessions and emails, Donor A communicated how they organized the manuscript material before shipping it and asked how they should organize future shipments. While archivists and other staff members often have conversations with donors regarding the scope and content of their collections, the extra lines of communication available through the oral history process have ensured that this has occurred and that Donor A has been more intimately involved in the process.

While the process of conducting oral histories and acquiring Donor A's papers is still ongoing, integrating oral history into the acquisition process has created moments for reflection and discussion that have enhanced the context and metadata for the collection. At the height of the project, the interviewer would block off three to four hours a week for oral history interviews with Donor A but, during these appointments, they would use only one to two hours to record an oral history. The interviewer and interviewee would use the rest of the time to discuss the donor's materials and past and future interviews. These moments provided openings within the traditional workflow, forcing the archivist to slow down and engage the donor in the archival process. For example, at points in the interviews, Donor A, while recounting a significant point in their life or career, would remember that a certain document or photograph within the collection pertained to the same event. These recollections were usually prefaced with comments such as, "What that photograph doesn't show is that. . . ."

Through its work with Donor A, the SWC learned that oral histories can be completed in ways that both honour oral history as a complicated and nuanced process and assist archivists in enhancing finding aids with more robust scope and content descriptions, targeted subject headings, and clear identification of related collections in SWC's holdings. However, oral history has functioned as much more than a means to that end. The interviews also examine lives – from childhood through careers and beyond – furthering oral history's original function in the archives as a discrete historical source. For example, they

document Donor A's family's German roots in Texas and include reflections on Texans' use of the German language during the 1940s. Moreover, the interviews describe the minutiae of the donor's career as a cancer researcher, becoming a valuable resource for scientists as well as historians of science and medicine. Providing the donor with transcripts of their oral histories has helped them clarify their thoughts for future interviews and, most excitingly, has created an opportunity for annotating the transcript with family photographs from the physical collection. This augmented oral history transcript provides context for the Donor A Papers that the SWC's traditional workflow could never have created. Without question, the experiment with this new process has resulted in both transcripts and arrangement and description being enhanced, reciprocally, in unexpected ways.

In the example of Donor B, oral history was the glue that held together a family collection that was fundamental to describing the origins of a small rural community north of Lubbock. The Donor B Collection centres around the relatives of a German immigrant who founded a mercantile store, dairy, and tractor-implement provider. The Museum of TTU had agreed to acquire a small amount of artifactual materials from Donor B's former store, which had itself functioned as a local museum after its closing. The museum was not interested in the business's documentary records, however. As a result, the donor contacted the SWC to begin the process of donating their unique documents. This provided a second opportunity to experiment with uniting oral history with acquisition, arrangement, and description.

The project, which began with a single phone call, eventually connected the SWC with family members throughout Texas and New Mexico. We began by conducting oral history interviews with local members of the Donor B family, which in turn led us to still more interviews with more distant family members. Consequently, the SWC continues to acquire the family's records and business materials. Oral history came to drive the entire acquisition project, creating a roadmap of the locations of family materials across the US Southwest. For example, while the Donor B businesses were located nearby, many of their documents and records had been taken to New Mexico by a relative many years prior. Oral history sessions with this family member then led us to still more material housed in central Texas. The oral histories conducted thus far have helped establish a relationship with that distant branch of the family, leading in turn to other potential acquisitions.

The process of conducting interviews with Donor B's family boosted the creation of richer metadata and uncovered deeper connections between this new project and existing materials. For instance, the family pointed archivists to materials in the SWC's stacks that connected both explicitly and implicitly to the family's history. This included a book written by a family ancestor and recordings from relatives and other early community members. The bibliographic sections of our encoded finding aids now point researchers to these texts, while their <relatedmaterials> element links to the oral histories. While archivists might have identified and added these references, this experiment ensured their discovery. More importantly, it directly involved family members in the discoveries, giving them a sense of partnership in the archival method.

As with the Donor A Papers, this collaboration also helped archivists connect the finding aid to related archival collections. As an example, at the same time Donor B's materials were entering the building, the department was also acquiring materials from families and individuals who, we learned through oral history, also had deep German roots in Texas. Because oral history revealed this shared cultural connection, we could begin mapping relationships among these collections. Oral history had empowered archivists to better understand not only their donors but also the communities in which the donors lived. In short, the acquisition of the Donor B Collection has evolved into a well-developed oral history project.

Oral history as an acquisition tool ultimately equipped the SWC to assemble a collection that illuminates the cultural and economic influence of German immigrants in Texas while adding a completely new chapter vis-à-vis a small, rural West Texas community. More exciting was oral history's establishment of context for the ever-broadening scope of the collection: it could record the significance of donations from the perspectives of a diverse cross-section of family members. Most important of all was that it centred the Donor B family as creators, archivists, and narrators of their own history – just as the SWC had hoped it could.

This democratization of the acquisition and description process has made it necessary to reconsider existing workflows and individual responsibilities – a project that is still ongoing. It has also led to new examinations of how to reconcile processes that had previously treated oral histories as archives separate from donors' "real" archival collections. The Donor A Papers and Donor B Collection are clear instances of oral history creating metadata that is much

richer than that allowed by pre-existing approaches. More than ever before, all the elements of the SWC/SCL are coming together to create the content that researchers desire.

Lessons Learned

Efforts to continue the integration of disparate archival tools into an acquisition, arrangement, description, and discovery template are still in the early stages. While the Donor A and Donor B acquisitions have proven beneficial in unique ways, there are obvious instances in which this approach cannot apply. For example, donations that arrived years, if not decades, ago present few means through which to contact donors or their descendants. The SWC has hundreds of such donations awaiting arrangement and description. That volume further prohibits integrating oral history into collection descriptions without cherry-picking which collections should and should not receive this advantage. Additionally, because the acquisitions date from so long ago, the likelihood of additional donations from these donors is small. Nevertheless, there may be instances in which interviews with relatives of deceased donors could provide details for existing collections and additional donations. Time and diligent research are required to confirm this.

Also, as with all archives, resources are always in short supply. The SWC employs six staff and faculty members, but even so, it must distribute its people judiciously. Some tasks that support this project will inevitably fall by the wayside. Simply travelling to and from donors to acquire their materials and conduct oral history interviews has necessitated hiring a new staff member. Implementing oral history as an integrated part of acquisitions has siphoned the acquisitions field representative's time and energy away from processing. Scheduling, conducting, and following up on oral histories and the miscellaneous labour that accompanies those tasks have also been required. Sacrificing the archives' oral history standards to focus on other archival purposes would result in the loss of aspects of oral history that make it special. There are no shortcuts.

Any solution to this dilemma would only succeed insofar as the pace and volume of acquisitions allow. Despite COVID-19 restrictions on travel and attendant budget cuts, in the first nine months of 2021, the SWC had already amassed 1,500 linear feet of new material. Acquisition at this pace requires

endless communication with donors, extensive travel, box moving, paperwork, and occasional reorganization of existing storage to ensure proper housing. It is hard to guarantee that oral histories will be gathered alongside companion collections, thus perpetuating the problems with which the SWC has struggled for decades. One step to offset this has been an attempt to identify connections between existing and new oral histories and pending acquisitions before collections enter the building. But as with any organization that collects at such a high volume, this is only possible when archivists can find the time – time that often does not exist precisely because of that volume. Ultimately, many donors will simply have to be excluded from the cocreative approach.

The only viable solution thus far has been to allocate the field representative's time away from legacy finding aids and older unprocessed collections toward arranging and describing only those collections that have been acquired in conjunction with recent oral histories. Given that the SWC already practised a catch-as-catch-can philosophy in terms of selecting which papers to process, this solution has had little impact on the department's workflows. By late 2021, the field representative was arranging the papers of a prominent Lubbock Chicano activist, using their oral histories, as well as those of individuals who knew them, as contextual tools.

Other resource restrictions have affected the SWC's efforts. Although the AV department tirelessly transcribes oral histories, the number of extant interviews means that transcriptions circulate back to the acquisitions field representative on an unpredictable schedule. This bottleneck hinders the field representative's ability to integrate discoveries made through oral history into the real-time processing of collections. While listening to a recording and using notes written before, during, or after an interview somewhat offset this, an electronically searchable transcript is vastly more efficient. Both the transcript and the recording-plus-notes options have been included in our nascent workflows.

Another lesson that quickly became apparent was the need for immediacy in our relationship building. New, well-maintained relationships have enhanced the archives but, left untended, they will quickly sour on the vine. Consistent – ideally, regularly scheduled – communication is essential. The drawbacks of maintaining these relationships are something that archivists who are experienced in donor relations already know too well: the perils of donor expectations. Integrating donors into the acquisition, arrangement, and description of their treasures may result in requests to revise processing archivists' completed work.

This is usually a small, if sometimes vexing, price to pay to provide researchers with the most accurate information. In the worst cases, however, donors might make demands that disregard fundamental archival practices. The SWC has found that these requests are almost always made through ignorance, and that the same regular and meaningful communication that enables acquisition is perfect for helping to explain these practices and overcome this challenge. We are also aware that collections retrieved under the shadow of fiscal contributions by collection donors could easily complicate all aspects of this process, but this has not yet been the case within this project.

Future Steps

The process of building relationships with Donors A and B is far from over. After all, integrating them into archival processes is the point of this experiment. There are other projects to which the SWC hopes to direct its resources in the near future. Our acquisitions field representative has begun scheduling oral history interviews designed to reach out to members of Lubbock's Mexican American community, a population that is under-documented in the SWC. This not only builds on preceding work by the SWC but also helps to meet a long-held goal of empowering diverse communities to insert their stories into the archives on their own terms. Moreover, it provides avenues for advocacy and exhibits where Mexican American communities can counter whitewashed narratives of West Texas history. Thus, oral history can function as a tool for social justice within archival work – a means of (narrative) subversion that also enriches the SWC's scope and breadth.

Several other groups with little self-representation in the institution are also on the list of potential collaborations. For example, a sizable Yaqui (Yoeme) community lives near Lubbock.[20] While patrons can find documentation of this community's story in the William Curry and Frances Mayhugh Holden Papers,

---

[20] An Indigenous nation in Northwestern Mexico, the Yaqui refer to themselves as *Yoeme*, or the "people." *Yaqui* is the term most used to describe the Yoeme in primary and secondary sources. In addition, many Yoemem often refer to themselves as Yaqui. For more on Yaqui (Yoeme) history and culture, see David Delgado Shorter, *We Will Dance Our Truth: Yaqui History in Yoeme Performance* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) and Raquel Padilla Ramos, *Progreso y Libertad: Los Yaquis en la Víspera de la Repatriación* (Hermosillo, MX: Programa Editorial de Sonora/Instituto Sonorense de Cultura, 2006).

this collection has been assembled from the perspective of a scholar interested in retelling the Yaqui cultural narrative rather than capturing it in these people's own words.[21] Uniting the perspective of the Holden Papers with something more intimate – something belonging uniquely to that community – can help to make the SWC's holdings more socially conscious and, possibly, reparative.

The SWC's current acquisition policy is geared toward building relationships with existing donors and their extended networks. These are predominately white and often wealthy men, representing the historic domain of the Southwest Collection. This focus has left little time to develop other relationships in West Texas. Oral history can and perhaps should be the avenue through which relationships are nurtured for the benefit of both minority communities and Southwest Collection researchers. It can be a force that both facilitates the flow of donors' stories into the archives and creates donors who are active agents. Archivists and oral historians have noted for decades that oral history can close gaps resulting from archives' historic fixation with paper and the written word – evidence that some communities simply do not preserve or never created.

Building relationships with minority communities requires not just departmental support but also institutional support. It must be more than a side project that manifests as an occasional roundtable, one-off oral history, or formal event. Creating space for under-documented groups takes abundant effort and requires that the energies traditionally devoted to privileged communities be reassigned to establish, develop, and nurture such relationships. With or without that support, oral history can recast the SWC in the role of a respected location for preserving the histories of peoples whose experiences with similar predominantly white and male institutions may have at times been tense. Such an effort necessitates constant reflection and a willingness to self-evaluate, recognize our limitations, and change, at all levels.

Smaller projects are on the docket as well. For instance, Lubbock has six excellent Thai food restaurants, each with a distinct take on the cuisine. How did this population arrive in Lubbock and create a market for a cuisine that, only 30 years ago, would have been impossible to find in West Texas? Building from some existing personal relationships with members of this group will easily give rise to oral histories, which in turn can lead to supplemental documentary

---

21   Texas Tech University, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, William Curry and Francis Mayhugh Holden Papers, 1750–2016 and undated, http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/taro/ttusw/00389/tsw-00389.html.

records, new relationships with this community, and other as-yet-unimagined opportunities to preserve this unique serving of regional history.

The SWC hopes to achieve more everyday benefits through continued collaborative knowledge-building with donors. The idea of integrating oral history in real time with the work of processing archivists is only in its nascent stages. With Donors A and B, we have already witnessed the possibilities of enhanced metadata, but donor assistance with arranging files sent in bulk without discernible organization may allow us to reconceptualize respect des fonds in some instances. Only the donors truly know the relationships among their information objects.

Beyond the benefits to arrangement, such oral histories will guide us internally, toward potentially related collections of which the donors are completely unaware but that we can link, within the XML finding aid, to other access points. Even better, we could upload, or embed in finding aids, the audio of oral history recordings. Unfortunately, DuraSpace (DSpace), our current digital collections platform hosted through the Texas Digital Library, is unable to support audiovisual and streaming media. However, collaboration to implement such functionality is ongoing, and if it does become available, the sky is the limit for this last component of accessibility.

Finally, the SWC would like to find quantitative evidence that the project of integrating oral history into the acquisition process is having an impact. The TARO website underwent extensive enhancements that debuted in December 2021. Among its improvements, it features more robust metrics to track finding aid usage. The site may be able to track clicks on related-collection links within the finding aids targeted by the SWC's experiment. Such analytics, which are already available on DSpace via Google Analytics, could be paired with TARO's metrics to develop a complete picture of when, where, and how researchers are responding to this work, empowering SWC archivists to build a case for expanding these efforts.

Conclusion

Until late 2019, the Southwest Collection relied on time-tested methods to first acquire and then describe collections. Its thousands of published and unprocessed collections are a testament to decades of labour. Thousands of oral histories

collected over the decades indicate a similar commitment to documenting the historical record, yet, these two spheres have operated independently, only infrequently combining their efforts to create a meaningful impact on gathering donors' stories through both documents and the spoken word. SWC archivists have wondered how we could bridge this distance – how acquisition, arrangement, and description could be enhanced through collaboration.

The SWC manuscript department created and filled an acquisitions field representative position in early 2020, just prior to the COVID pandemic. This role was designed, first, to acquire collections and, second, to conduct oral history interviews and arrange, describe, and create finding aids for collections. The pandemic forced an evolution in the position's duties, emphasizing the collection of oral histories via phone and computer over acquisition, which had become impossible in the work-from-home environment. Because of the months of experience and relationships built during that time, oral history grew as a component of acquisition. From there, it was a short step to leverage at least a handful of the relationships built during that process to expand acquisition to include a web of donors, all of whom could empower archivists working on processing and metadata to enhance the collections to the benefit of researchers.

By collaborating with Donors A and B, the SWC has slowly proven that this work can be accomplished. Cocreating knowledge has been, and will continue to be, successful. Our archival processes have slowly become not only more transparent but also more democratic, making space for the voices of still other communities. As we move forward into the acquisitional freedoms afforded by fewer pandemic restrictions, the SWC anticipates more successes and opportunities to expand this approach even further.

BIOGRAPHY   Robert G. Weaver is currently the Manuscript Archivist of the Southwest Collection, within Texas Tech University's Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. He oversees archival processing, focusing principally on EAD finding aid creation; curates the Southwest Collection's digital collections; and serves as the archives' social media coordinator. He has served as Chair of Texas Archival Resources Online and as Editor of the *West Texas Historical Review* for the West Texas Historical Association. His current research focuses on archival description, the automation of archival processes through technological innovation, and archival outreach with a focus on social media.

BIOGRAPHY   Zachary R. Hernández is currently a PhD candidate in Texas Tech University's Department of English and the Unit Manager for Acquisitions at the Southwest Collection within Texas Tech University's Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. He received his MA in Mexican American studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and he has published reviews for the *West Texas Historical Review* and *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, as well as an essay in *Reading Aridity in Western American Literature*. His current research explores the narratives surrounding Teresa Urrea, a religious and political figure who incited Indigenous uprisings leading up to the Mexican Revolution. The project considers Indigenous agency as a force for social change at the end of the 19th century.