

Surveying your state: A Model for uncovering and discovering oral histories

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Introduction

Oral narratives rich in history and information can be found in the collections of libraries, museums, historical societies and other cultural repositories across the nation with some effort. Identifying and locating usable oral history collections can be a barrier to access for researchers, students, and the public as many remain largely unknown, un-cataloged, or unpreserved for present use. While the internet provides a great starting point as a gateway to information, for a variety of reasons many oral history collections continue to remain hidden.

In 2008, researchers at the Oklahoma State University Library's Oklahoma Oral History Research Program created a statewide survey to analyze and pinpoint collections across the state. This survey was developed with the primary objective of creating a master list of Oklahoma's oral history holdings. A secondary objective of this project involved the development of a survey model that other states could replicate. Additional survey benefits included facilitating cooperation in the development of future oral history projects, reducing costly duplication of effort, creating an inventory of collections at risk, and in building a network of librarians and oral history professionals in Oklahoma.

We hope with this survey model provided in the coming pages, you too can develop similar efforts in discovering and uncovering oral histories within your state thus providing access to oral history resources for others and furthering the preservation and promotion of such materials in our libraries, institutions, and cultural repositories for generations to come.

This model was prepared in part thanks to a 2008 Amigos Library Services Fellowship awarded to Tanya Finchum and Juliana Nykolaiszyn with the Oklahoma State University Library. To view material produced as a result of this survey effort, visit: www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/survey.htm.

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Steps for Surveying Your State

1. Create a Project Timeline

Sometimes having a roadmap is the best way to travel. This is also true when conducting research. One of the first things you should do is think about everything that needs to take place and from there, create a timeline of activities in order to achieve your final outcome. This includes, but is not limited to budgeting time for gathering contact information, creating questions, designing the survey, pre-testing, marketing, launching, compiling results, and preparing reports.

2. Determine Your Survey Population

Oral histories can be created by many organizations. These include: historical societies, museums, genealogical societies, parks, zoos, arts organizations, academic libraries, public libraries, corporate libraries, special libraries, private and public foundations, college/university academic departments, and businesses. The key is not placing limits on the institutions and cultural repositories you contact, but finding those organizations where oral histories may be discovered or uncovered.

If you want to focus on a specific group, for example only museums or only libraries, this would be a good time in the planning processes to determine such an angle. If you are looking for a more comprehensive look into the possible oral history holdings in your state, you may want to expand and develop your list of contacts to include various institutions and entities.

3. Develop Your List of Contacts

Once you have a target audience in mind, you may be able to enlist the help of state agencies in developing your list of contacts. Many states have a Historical Records Advisory Board (<http://www.statearchivists.org/shrabs.htm>) or a Department of Libraries. These organizations usually have a database of contact information for cultural repositories or institutions they serve. Build partnerships and share the data with such organizations. You will find that these agencies are also in the business of preservation and have a vested interest in helping organizations with this cause. Since oral histories are recorded in a variety of formats, some more fragile than others, surveying your state could tie in nicely with future preservation efforts or programming. More than likely, these groups would be willing to assist or point you in the right direction as you collect vital information, like mail/e-mail addresses regarding your target audience. Ask if they would be willing to share contact information in exchange for survey results or other partnership opportunities.

Also check to see if your state belongs to a regional oral history organization (<http://www.oralhistory.org/about/regional-organizations/>). These organizations may help guide you to known oral history collections within their respective regions, thus adding additional contacts to your survey population.

4. Decide on the Survey's Implementation Strategy

Questions to think about: How are you going to contact your population? How are you going to have institutions and cultural repositories responding to your survey? There are several options available, depending on the budget you have at the time of creating your survey. You can focus your efforts on the internet only (contact via e-mail, complete survey through programs like SurveyMonkey.com). You can also send out a paper mailing (contact via postal mail, include copy of the survey and return self addressed stamped envelope). Another option is combining a mix of both approaches, using the internet and postal mail for contact, survey distribution and response.

One major drawback in conducting an all internet based survey, some of the smaller organizations in your state may not be equipped to participate based on lack of technology available. This is important to consider when you are planning how your survey will be released.

We propose the mixed approach for best results. This includes:

- Creating both a paper copy of the survey and an internet based survey
- For respondents with valid e-mail addresses, e-mail the link to the internet based survey
- For respondents with no e-mail, send a paper copy of the survey via postal mail, along with an SASE for ease in return

5. Create Your Survey Questions

What do you want to learn about oral history collections in your state? There are many things to consider, including subjects covered, different recording formats, usable collections, number of transcripts or indexes available, web sites dedicated to projects, preservation, etc. You may want to ask Likert-type scale questions, open ended questions or a mix. Either way, question development is important in discovering answers to meet the overall goals of your survey research. For sample questions, please see the Appendix.

6. Pre-Test Your Survey

Pre-testing your survey simply means taking it out for a test drive. You can pre-test your survey with oral historians you have a relationship with, fellow colleagues, or others. In the pre-test phase, you are looking to see if the questions make sense, are worded correctly, have a good flow, and are easy to understand. Also, you may have forgotten to ask important questions. Remember, the pre-test phase is about feedback and minor re-tooling before the big launch. This is a time where you can work out any kinks not only with questions, but also with how the survey looks, both in print and online. If you are conducting an internet based survey, remember it is important to send out the link to your pre-testers and make sure everything works as you hoped it would, and if not, go back and make adjustments.

7. Think About Marketing

In some cases, it is good to let your target population know that a survey is coming their way. This can take place through formal or informal channels. Some ideas to help promote your survey include a pre-launch press release and a launch press release. Try to work with statewide, regional or various local groups that produce newsletters and submit a brief or article about your goals and intentions. Also, be sure to include on your organization's website any promotional information/content developed.

8. Launch Your Survey

For paper/postal mail surveys, here are things to consider once you are happy with your survey instrument:

- Draft and print letters explaining the survey. Include deadlines and contact information
- Print mailing addresses for envelopes
- Print survey instrument
- Prepare self-addressed stamped envelope (if using) or other method of survey return
- Assemble all components and mail
- After mailing your survey, have a plan in place to handle postal returns – mail returned to you for a variety of reasons

For internet based surveys, here are things to consider once you are happy with your survey instrument:

- Create an e-mail letter explaining the survey. Include deadlines and contact information
- Check survey website URL and make sure it works within the body of your e-mail (or your particular method of online survey distribution)
- Compile e-mail address lists and distribute survey electronically
- After e-mailing your survey, have a plan in place to handle “bounce backs” – those e-mails that are returned to sender for a variety of reasons

9. Collect Results

If you are conducting a paper based survey, create a space to keep all incoming survey responses. Remember it may be easier processing the survey responses as they come in, instead of waiting until the final deadline. As surveys come in, record the responding institution's name and process survey data by using a spreadsheet or other data management program. If you are conducting an internet based survey, some programs will process the data for you pending certain parameters. Again, don't wait until the last minute to see what is coming in, be sure to check your online survey management system periodically, export reports, and monitor activity.

After your initial survey collection, you may also want to send out reminder e-mails/mailings to those institutions who did not respond to your survey request. One to two reminders before the final deadline are sometimes key in helping to motivate institutions to respond.

10. Analyze Results

Now that your data collection has come to an end, it is time to look at your spreadsheet (or other program) and take a look at what your survey results say about oral history collections in your state. If you utilized open ended responses, try looking at the trends and group like ideas together. If your survey was more numbers driven, you can also crunch the data or utilize statistical programs to generate detailed results.

11. Share Results

What good is conducting a statewide survey of oral history collections if you do not share the data with others in your state? Upon completion of your survey, try to publish the results of your work in various local, statewide, regional, or national publications. The internet is also a great tool for showcasing your survey results. Be sure to highlight results on your own organization's website, and tie in with other groups, for example, your state's Department of Libraries. Also, submit your work to various calls for conference program presentations in order to help spread the word about your work.

Final Thoughts

One of our main objectives in developing a statewide survey was to create a living electronic document that included all known oral history collections throughout Oklahoma, with periodic updates as new information becomes available. We found this oral history directory was a great way to utilize the data gathered in our statewide survey, along with providing the public with an electronic resource that, for the first time, brings to light many oral history collections across our state. In the survey process, we found that many repositories had questions about oral history preservation and methodology, and we now hope to connect such respondents with needed information to help their collections survive into the future.

What started out as a fact finding mission has taken on a new life of providing education and awareness of collections across Oklahoma. We hope you too can have the same success in helping connect others in your respective states with not only holdings information, but also archival and preservation techniques that will bring hidden oral history recordings and transcripts to light.

Appendix

Sample Survey Questions

These questions were taken from a 2008 survey launched by the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at the OSU Library. This is just a starting point to help facilitate question development.

- Does your organization have a collection of oral history recordings?
- What is the status of your oral history activities?
- What subject areas does your oral history collection(s) cover?
- In what recording format(s) are your original oral history interviews?
- What percentage of interviews have been transcribed?
- What percentage of interviews are in usable/unusable conditions?
- Please describe any preservation or data migration efforts underway or planned in the future.
- How can your collection be accessed by patrons or the public?
- Do you have an internet website dedicated to your oral history collection?
- To what extent can your oral histories be accessed on the internet?
- Have your oral history interviews been used to publish books, develop displays, or in other projects?
- In what oral history training programs have you or others in your organization participated?
- Would you be interested in attending a symposium on oral history?
- What topics would you like to see covered in a symposium?
- When thinking about future oral history projects, what subject areas do you think need to be top priority?
- List oral history collections in this state which you are aware.
- To what organizations with an oral history focus do you belong?
- What are your thoughts regarding initiating a statewide oral history interest group?
- If grant funds of \$500 to \$5,000 were available to help preserve current collections or undertake new projects, what projects would you propose?
- Would you be interested in subscribing to an electronic listserv pertaining to oral history collections within the state?