

# Survey of Oral History Collections in Oklahoma

## Results Summary

### Introduction

Oral narratives rich in history and information can be found in the collections of libraries, museums, historical societies and other cultural repositories across Oklahoma 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 un-preserved for present use.

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 building a network of librarians and oral history professionals in Oklahoma. Material developed as a result of this survey can be accessed online by visiting <http://www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/survey.htm>.

Below, you will find a brief summary of results regarding the 2008 Survey of Oral History Collections in Oklahoma.

### Respondents

Using mailing lists compiled from the Oklahoma Historical Records Advisory Board and the Oklahoma State University Library, approximately 500 surveys were e-mailed and/or mailed to cultural repositories such as historical societies/museums, higher education institutions/libraries, and public libraries across the state. Survey responses were received from 124 cultural repositories and 59 oral history collections from across Oklahoma were identified.

The majority of responses were received from public libraries (25%) and museums (25%), followed by other institutions (17%), academic libraries (12%), historical societies (11%), genealogical societies (7%), and arts organizations (3%).

### Subject Areas Covered

Many of the oral histories included a mix of local history or projects tied in with the respondent's specific organization (arts, aviation, terrorism, oil and gas exploration, Native Americans, etc.). Academic institutions and the statewide Oklahoma History Center collections reflected a broad body of work covering various topics of interest to Oklahomans and the communities they serve.

### Recording Formats

This particular question looked at the different recording formats of oral history collections held in various repositories. Many respondents selected a mix of choices, including cassette tape, reel-to-reel, compact disk, mini disk, video cassette, and digital video tape. Many indicated a move from older formats, such as cassettes, to digital recording (both audio and video) in the comments section of this question. Few institutions indicated a lack of the original recording, with only a paper transcript available in their respective holdings.

### Transcription

In this question, researchers asked if collections were transcribed and to what extent. Only a limited number of responses indicated available transcripts, although some respondents mentioned a gradual transcription effort was underway with the help of both paid staff and/or volunteers. Of the 59 collections identified, only 18 indicated available transcripts for some, if not all of their recordings. Those respondents that did indicate availability of transcripts are noted in the *Directory of Oral History Collections in Oklahoma*.

## **Preservation Efforts**

With recordings in various formats, some in fragile condition, researchers were interested in the question regarding preservation efforts and data migration. This answers provided insight into the care of oral history recordings. Some respondents were engaged in migrating old cassette tapes to compact disks while others took the time to explain that they were not sure what to do in terms of preservation and would like additional guidance. From this question, the researchers learned that this would be a key area to target future continuing education programming within the state.

## **Collection Access**

This question asked how oral history collections could be accessed by patrons or the public. The majority of respondents selected in-house use only. Only a limited number of oral history collections were available online or through interlibrary loan. Also a small percentage of collections were closed to the general public.

## **Collection Website**

The survey also looked at the availability of an internet website dedicated to the repository's oral history collection. Of those with oral history collections, the majority of respondents indicated no web presence. Of those collections that did indicate a web presence, respondents noted a mix of available information online, ranging from just the collection holdings to a combination of transcripts, audio and video. For those respondents that did provide such information, please consult the *Directory of Oral History Collections in Oklahoma*.

## **Oral History Use in Books, Displays, Other Projects**

This question asked respondents if their oral histories have been used to publish books, develop displays or in other activities. The majority of respondents indicated such usage, with some emphasizing the use in creating local history books about their respective communities. Many did not provide added detail outside of answering yes or no.

## **Training**

The survey asked if respondents would be interested in attending a future oral history symposium to be held at Oklahoma State University. The majority of respondents provided a positive response to this question if registration fees were reasonable. Some respondents also provided a response of unsure which is a realization in line with the state of the overall economy during the survey period. Overall, this question helps assist researchers in the development of future training efforts.

## **Future Projects**

Respondents provided many suggestions for future oral history projects. Suggested subjects for new projects included such topics as old ways of life, Native American oral histories, the immigrant experience in Oklahoma, war veterans' flight experiences, interviews with old time cowboys, art and architecture, political movements, black towns, disappearing towns, WPA projects, and a variety of social topics impacting the lives of average people.

## **Knowledge of Other Collections**

When asked about knowledge of other oral history collections within the state, a large portion of respondents indicated a lack of knowledge of such collections. The key collection highlighted by those that provided a response included the holdings at the Oklahoma History Center. Researchers believe that this question highlights the need for additional efforts geared toward marketing and promoting oral history collections across the state.

## **Membership in Organizations**

The majority of respondents listed no membership or affiliation with organizations providing an oral history slant. Overall, this shows researchers that many organizations do not have a body to turn to for added training opportunities or guidance when it comes to oral history.

## **Future Statewide Involvement**

The researchers sought to gauge an interest in developing statewide resources that could bring Oklahoma's oral history community together. Questions asked if respondents were interested in joining a statewide e-mail listserv regarding oral history and in forming a statewide interest group. The data recorded 43% of respondents were interested in joining an oral history specific listserv and 45% in favor of forming an interest group. Both of these responses indicate the interest in developing channels of communication regarding statewide oral history efforts.

## **Grant Opportunities**

Several respondents provided information as to how they would make use of additional funds if available. Primarily funds would be used to initiate new oral history projects, for transcription, to digitize existing collections, to migrate from one format to another, for preservation of recordings, and for training. This question was of particular interest to the Oklahoma Historical Records Advisory Board, as they regularly offer preservation grants for a variety of projects, including oral histories.

## **Creation of the Statewide Directory**

Responses from the 2008 Oral History Collections in Oklahoma Survey provided the foundation for the development of a statewide directory that includes collections uncovered from the data. This directory, available online by visiting <http://www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/survey.htm>, is a living document that will be updated regularly as new collections come to light or changes are made to existing entries by institutions. We hope you enjoy exploring this document as you discover the oral history gems in Oklahoma cultural institutions and repositories across the state.

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