



# ORAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

February 2020

Volume LIV

Number 1

---

## In this Newsletter...

In addition to customary messages from the OHA president and co-executive director, you will find a short piece about a fascinating public history and civic engagement project at LaGuardia Community College in New York City and another story about presidential libraries from the fall 2019 OHA conference in Salt Lake City, Utah.

And speaking of OHA conferences, if you haven't already done so, mark your 2020 calendars for Oct. 21-24, when oral historians will convene in Baltimore, Maryland, for a meeting focused on "The Quest for Democracy: One Hundred Years of Struggle."



# Grassroots oral history documents life in nation's largest public housing development

So what is it like to live in Queensbridge?

That's the 3,100-unit public housing development in Queens, New York's Long Island City built in 1939, which, after decades of evolution from mostly white to mostly African American and Latino residents, now faces challenges of gentrification and an uncertain future.

Students from the Long Island City campus of LaGuardia Community College set out to document the historic public housing community, conducting oral history interviews with 20 of Queensbridge's older residents.

What they found was stories of a community in transition whose residents take tremendous pride in their home, despite ongoing challenges with deteriorating infrastructure, concerns about crime and relations with police.

Resident April Simpson told student Amanda Jones that the notion of public housing being riddled with crime and drugs is a misconception.

Crime and drugs don't affect public housing alone, Simpson said.

"It's even in the suburbs," she observed. "However, while it was here in public housing, or what they call low-income housing, there really wasn't any attention to it. They were giving attention to it when they find it's in the suburbs. And the rural areas, what they call non-urbanite.

"As long as [the drug problem] was in lower-income, people-of-color communities, it wasn't such a big deal, but when it started reaching out to more suburbanites and seeing their kids becoming strung out on drugs and doing things that weren't acceptable, then attention was brought to it. And now, there's a big drug war. We've been fighting that war," Simpson said.

The drug problem is real in Queensbridge, she said.

“I have to say there were people that were strung out on drugs, but they were not bad people,” Simpson said. “They just made bad choices. A lot of the young men and women back in the heroin days they still stuck together. They weren’t robbing each other out here. That came from outside people coming in. It wasn’t within the community.”

Resident Karen Alston has lived in Queensbridge since she was born in 1960 and recalled her early years as a very different life than Queensbridge today.

She described a wide variety of social activities and programs for kids, like after-school programs and roller skating. And grown-ups kept an eye out.

“There was no such thing as disrespecting an adult. That never happened,” Alston said. “If you disrespected an adult, not only did you get told by your parents, but you got told by every other parent that heard about it. You got chastised by them.”

It was, Alston said, a classic example of the notion that it takes a village to raise a child.

“That’s truly the way it was back in the day,” she recalled. “Everybody looked out. Nobody had locked doors. Windows were open. Doors were unlocked. Everybody fed everybody. It was one serious community. I don’t know what happened.”

Excerpts of the interviews, along with archival photos and ample contextual information were published last year as “Voices of Queensbridge: Stories from the Nation’s Largest Public Housing Development,” edited by historian Stephen Petrus and education programs assistant director Molly Rosner, both of LaGuardia Community College.

For more information about the project and the book, contact Petrus at [spetrus@lagcc.cuny.edu](mailto:spetrus@lagcc.cuny.edu) or Rosner at [mrosner@lagcc.cuny.edu](mailto:mrosner@lagcc.cuny.edu).

# LBJ and Truman presidential libraries face unique challenges, library officials tell OHA audience

People who manage small oral history collections in local libraries and museums are sometimes overwhelmed with challenges associated with digitizing older interviews, assuring transcripts are processed and making the collection accessible for exhibits and schoolchildren and anyone else who is exploring the local past.

But if you think that can be a challenge, listen for a few moments to Randy Sewell of the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum in Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/> or Nicole Hadad, Claudia Anderson and Brian McNerney of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum in Austin, Texas. <http://www.lbjlibrary.org/>

Their stories will make you envy the curator of a small collection.

Truman, of course, was president and left office in the early days of oral history, when it was customary not to keep original recordings. The library, Sewell said, retains only audio snippets for voice identification purposes. The practice changed in the 1980s, and interviews recorded since then are retained.

Library staff had the unusual experience of the retired president being intensely interested in the goings on in his library.

“Very little happened in the library without Mr. Truman knowing about it,” Sewell said.

The 33<sup>rd</sup> president of the United States supported oral history interviews to add to the library’s collection, but he was never interviewed by the library.

Novelist Merle Miller, the author of “Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman,” published in 1973 after Truman’s death, conducted what has been described as numerous taped conversations with Truman. But some of the quotes attributed to Truman in the book have since been debunked.

Sewell said the library’s interviewing was interrupted in the early 1960s by

the death of President John F. Kennedy. But eventually, most of the people who worked in the Truman White House were interviewed, including several Cabinet secretaries.

Beginning in the mid-60s, the library started conducting interviews in Europe focusing on the Marshall Plan. State Department officials and others involved in foreign policy also were interviewed.

By 1976, interviews had been recorded with 350 people, Sewell said, but no one ever interviewed Truman's wife Bess, who was an extraordinarily private person.

"Interviewing her was never seriously contemplated," Sewell said.

Curiously, he joked, it seemed that the longer you worked at the Truman library, "the more you began to look like Harry Truman." Interviewer Ned Johnson, for example, became a Truman impersonator.

In Austin, Texas, the LBJ Library faces a different set of challenges associated with a surfeit of interviews.

Oral history interviews with ultimately more than 1,000 people associated with Johnson began in the 1960s while he was still in the White House.

"What did they talk about? Almost everything," Hadad told the OHA audience. Interviewees include childhood friends, cousins, Lady Bird Johnson and a wide variety of people who worked with him, covering virtually every issue of the day. But only a few interviews were conducted with Johnson himself.

The collection includes 2,185 interviews with 1,510 interviewees by 128 interviewers, she said. About 90 percent of transcripts are available but just over one-third of recordings are, largely due to restrictions, some for security reasons, and lack of legal agreements.

Hadad said challenges of managing such a large collection include staff turnover, legal questions and changes in technology and aging media.

A particular challenge is "special" interviews—those given to the library, which often raise legal issues about access and sometimes raise transcription challenges, she said.

The library now is focusing on the future by digitizing recordings, making the collection more accessible and seeking guidance from the National Archives and Records Administration on legal issues. Occasionally, she said, new interviews are gathered.

Anderson described challenges the library faces in connection with recordings conducted by authors, journalists and other researchers. The content is valuable, but legal issues abound.

For example, she said, political scientist and one-time congressional staff member William Gibbons conducted interviews with more than 100 people for his series of books about the Vietnam war. But he got limited releases from the interviewees and did not ask for permission to donate the interviews to the archives.

In another example, Anderson said, Merle Miller sought to follow up his successful Truman biography with one about LBJ. Published in 1980, the book was not as successful as the Truman book, but Miller gave his LBJ tapes to the Johnson library, just as he had given his earlier Truman materials to the Truman library.

But the collection has languished because the tapes were not organized, dated or properly labeled, creating a major effort just to inventory them, she said. Additionally, Miller obtained no releases and sometimes secretly taped people in microcassettes.

Miller did not tell his interviewees that the tapes would go to the LBJ library, and one person told the library that Miller said the tapes would be destroyed, which, Anderson noted, “raises some ethical questions about processing these interviews.”

The library is seeking legal advice about making the material accessible at least for interviewees who are dead.

The complexity of managing such a massive oral history collection led the library’s McNerny to initiate an oral history project of the library itself, interviewing senior and retired staff members to capture the institutional memory for current and future staff.

Archives are inherently idiosyncratic, McNerny said, and every collection has

its own story, which makes it critical to document and understand the myriad staff decisions that underlie collections policies and practices.

---

We provide Intelligent Transcripts™ with Good Judgement, Experience, and Expert Research

<https://adeptwordmanagement.com/>      [mytranscripts@adeptwordmanagement.com](mailto:mytranscripts@adeptwordmanagement.com)



WORD MANAGEMENT INC™

---



**Visit the OHA Member Site**



---

*Copyright © 2020 Oral History Association, All rights reserved.  
Mary Kay Quinlan, Editor*

**Our mailing address is:**  
Box 193  
Middle Tennessee State University  
Murfreesboro, TN 37132



# Co-Executive Directors Report

By Louis Kyridakoudes

This past December, I led a delegation of 14 people from the Oral History Association on a week-long tour of Cuba. Despite recent changes by the current administration intended to make it more difficult to travel to Cuba, American citizens can still travel to the Caribbean's largest island. Traveling with OHA colleagues and friends made for a week of deep engagement with the people, culture, art, music and history of Cuba.

Sixty years after the revolution, Cuba is at a crossroads. The Cuban people face the challenges of preserving the revolution's gains in face of a global economy and a still-hostile U.S. policy shaped by the viciously punitive U.S. embargo and the 1995 Helms-Burton Act. We traveled to Cuba under the U.S. Treasury Department's "Support for the Cuban People" designation.

We worked closely with Charles Bittner to organize a week's visit of deep engagement with contemporary Cuba that allowed us to avoid what the eminent historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr. has criticized as "selling Cuba" to American tourists. Bittner, a sociologist who has taught at Southern Methodist and St. John's (N.Y.) Universities has been organizing cultural and scholarly tours of Cuba for more than 20 years, first in partnership with The Nation magazine and now with the Intercultural Travel Group.

For our trip, he organized an itinerary that connected our travelers with activists, artists, musicians, public historians and scholars who spoke to what Cuba is today and to what it is becoming.

We explored Havana's thriving art and music scene. Visits to Taller Experimental de Gráfica, an art cooperative focused on the practice of 19th century printmaking techniques, and other gallery and artist workshop tours allowed us to meet Cuban artists and learn about their work.

An evening with Frank Delgado, Cuba's leading folk musician and *troubadour* gave us a unique insight into the connections between the revival of Cuba's traditional musical forms and contemporary activism. A visit to the home of the Afro-Cuban rapper and activist duo, La Reina y la Real, led to an impromptu performance in their living room.



Rappers and Activists La Reina y La Real perform in their home.  
Photo courtesy of Lisa Eveleigh

We explored contemporary Cuban issues with leading experts and intellectuals. A tour with an architectural historian allowed us to learn of Havana's rich architectural history and the challenges of historic preservation. Seminar meetings with the eminent University of Havana sociologist Marta Núñez gave us a deep insight into gender and sexuality issues in contemporary Cuba.



Literary critic and author Susan Haus shed light on Cuba's contemporary literary culture. Our visit to ELAM, the Latin American Medical School, displayed Cuba's strong commitment to training the next generation of medical doctors. ELAM draws students from across the Americas and United States. We met with four of the nearly four dozen American students enrolled at ELAM to discuss their commitment to social justice through the practice of medicine.

We also traveled to Cuba's southern coast, visiting the cities of Cienfuegos and Trinidad. In Trinidad, a United Nations World Heritage site, we met with city historian and historical preservationist, Nancy Benitez, who shared her knowledge of the city's history and contemporary efforts to restore its historic city center. Trinidad's thriving folk art and traditional musical culture was captivating.



OHA members meeting with American medical students at ELAM.  
Photo courtesy of Charles Bittner

Cuba now has a dynamic private sector of restaurants, small inns, small shops and galleries, jazz clubs and contemporary music venues. All of this amid the beauty of Havana, city that has just celebrated its 500th anniversary of its founding, and the Cuban countryside made for a memorable week.

We are working with Charles Bittner to plan another OHA-sponsored trip, Jan. 3-10, 2021. You can learn more about the details and costs at the Association's website <http://www.oralhistory.org>.

# President's Letter

By Allison K. Tracy-Taylor

I'm excited to announce a new award structure for the Oral History Association.

Every year the OHA gives a number of awards to recognize outstanding work in various facets of the field. With feedback from members, awardees and award committee members, the Awards Task Force, led by Past President Todd Moye with Christa Whitney and Steve Estes, revised the structure of the Elizabeth B. Mason Project Award and the Oral History in a Nonprint Format Award. The new award is intended to be more flexible and responsive to the different types of projects and products oral history practitioners work on.

With the new Elizabeth B. Mason Multimedia Award, the OHA seeks to recognize outstanding oral history projects, collections, exhibits and multimedia presentations for the public. Up to three awards will be given each year. Qualifying projects may be any of the following:

- Oral History Project or Collection (physical and/or virtual)
- Exhibitions (physical and/or virtual)
- Documentary or Performance (podcasts, films, theatrical productions, mobile applications, etc.)

The OHA welcomes nominations for projects with an institutional affiliation, including those undertaken by libraries, archives, colleges and universities, museum and historical organizations, community-based institutions, and others. And we also welcome nominations for projects undertaken by academic scholars, independent researchers and ad hoc groups. The awards will not be given to an ongoing project or oral history program, although they may be given to a distinct project or interview series within such a program. We encourage nominations from both large and small oral history projects. Entries are welcome from around the world but must be submitted in English.

The following awards will remain as they have before: the Article Award, the Book Award, the Martha Ross Teaching Award (awarded in odd-numbered years), the Post-Secondary Teaching Award (awarded in even-numbered years), and the Stetson Kennedy Vox Populi Award.

The deadline for submissions for these and the Elizabeth B. Mason Multimedia Award is June 1, 2020. Information about the awards and the application process can be found [here](#). This page will be updated with information about the new award structure soon.

I thank those who provided feedback on the OHA's award structure, particularly those who had recently served on award committees. Their feedback was especially helpful. I also want to thank Todd, Christa and Steve for their good work on the Awards Task Force. I look forward to congratulating the recipient of all our awards in Baltimore.

I've also been working to prepare for Council's midwinter meeting. In addition to monthly conference calls, Council meets in person twice a year: during the OHA's annual meeting in October and at some point in, well, midwinter.

This year's meeting was at our conference hotel in Baltimore at the end of February. The meeting agenda included additional work on the OHA's new strategic plan, as well as updates on the work of the association's committees and task forces, a review of the association's standing resolutions and a number of other topics. We also met with members of the 2020 Local Arrangements Committee. I look forward to talking more about the midwinter meeting in my next letter.

Preparing for midwinter has me thinking about transparency in the OHA. We need to work on this in a number of ways, but one question I've heard recently is how do members of the association interface with Council?

Unfortunately, I don't have a clear answer. Not because Council doesn't want to be available, but because we don't have set procedures in place. So much of the association's work is done informally, which can be a benefit in some ways, but it also means when members have a question or feedback for the OHA's leadership, they often don't know where to start.

First, you can find contact information for all of the OHA's leadership [here](#), and you can contact us directly. If you do reach out to one of us, please understand that we do all have day jobs, so we may not be able to follow up immediately, but we will be happy to hear from you.

Besides reaching out to the leadership, participating in the occasional surveys we put out is always helpful and a good way to provide directed feedback. You can also attend the business meeting at our annual meetings in October. This is a great way to learn more about the association's current work, but there are also multiple opportunities for attendees to participate in the discussion and even raise new business. If you're a committee or task force member, the reports submitted to Council twice a year are a great place to include questions for or raise issues with Council.

Finally, you can always reach out to the Executive Office at [oha@oralhistory.org](mailto:oha@oralhistory.org). Our Co-Executive Directors Louis Kyriakoudes and Kris McCusker and Program Associate Faith Bagley are knowledgeable and happy to help.

As my letter might indicate, 2020 has already been a busy year for the OHA, and I'm looking forward to connecting with you all in one way or another in the coming months!