



ORAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

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THE QUEST FOR DEMOCRACY: One Hundred Years of Struggle

Different format, same features attract more than 700 conference attendees

The City of Baltimore played virtual host to the Oral History Association's 54th annual conference in October, when the uncontrolled covid-19 pandemic kept conference-goers at home and glued to their computers participating in workshops, roundtables, panels, social events, informal conversations and local tours characteristic of OHA conferences for decades.

And participate they did—without needing to set foot in an airport.

A near record total of 720 people (exceeded only by the 752 who attended the 2018 conference in Montreal) from more than 20 countries joined fellow oral historians for five days of exploring a shared interest in oral history. U.S. participants were joined by those who came from nearby Canada and far-away Australia and New Zealand. They came from South America (Brazil and Argentina) and from Asia (India, Japan, Republic of Korea) and

from Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates and from all over Europe (the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Sweden, Italy, Romania, Germany, Spain, Hungary and Luxembourg). For 329 of the attendees, it was their first OHA conference.

When spring lock-down orders began emerging around the world, OHA conference planners shifted from creating an in-person conference, whose plans were already well in hand, to a fully remote meeting. Planners identified various online platforms to recreate a virtual conference experience and gleaned advice from other professional and scholarly organizations facing similar challenges.

A financially critical part of the switch was the renegotiation of a contract with the Hyatt Baltimore Inner Harbor Hotel, which will now be the site of the OHA 2023 conference. Uncertainties remain about health and safety for conferences and related economic conditions in 2021, with current discussions considering a hybrid conference in Cincinnati next year.

But for now, take a look at some highlights from the 2020 virtual events, including awards for exemplary oral history work, a welcome to newly elected OHA leaders, and a glimpse at some of the 100-plus sessions that kept attendees busy and engaged.



President's Column



Co-Executive Directors' Report

Oral historians urge detailed planning for new virtual interviewing practices

If you ever have been tempted to give short shrift to advance planning before an oral history interview, don't even think about it if your interview will be conducted under covid-caused virtual circumstances.

That was the key takeaway from oral historians at a pre-conference workshop and conference sessions that focused on practical issues associated with conducting oral history interviews in circumstances once deemed not conducive to best oral history practice.

For starters, consult the decision tree and reference document created by the OHA Remote Interviewing Resources Task Force appointed in May by President Allison Tracy- Taylor. <https://www.oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/>

Task force member Jen Cramer told a pre-conference workshop that the decision tree is meant to be a tool oral historians can use to figure out specific details of recording remote interviews, including consideration of whether to use a cell phone or land line or web-based connection, for starters.

The decision tree enables oral historians to click on hyperlinks to access narrative pop-outs for more information as they determine what will work for their projects. Case studies provide detailed looks at various options, and the section on Remote Interviewing Online Resources includes an extensive list of resources and a large bibliography focusing on interviewing in times of crisis.

More than ever, a pre-interview conversation with your narrator is essential, panelists emphasized. What is the person comfortable with? Will a helper be available to troubleshoot technology issues? What is the quality of your internet connections? How can you improve audio quality? When is the technology getting just too complicated and in danger of flustering the narrator?

The key is remaining flexible and realizing that the process will be more complex than a comfortable, in-person interview and thus will take more planning, task force member Sarah Milligan told workshop attendees.

If you and your narrator are most comfortable using Zoom, for example, despite whatever quality limitations it might present, just go ahead and use it, Milligan said. "The important thing is to get it done."

Task force member Rachel Mears of the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project reminded oral historians that part of their advanced planning should be identifying a repository for completed interviews. That should help inform interviewers about technical or other requirements the repository may have as well as expectations regarding consent forms, including wet-ink or virtual signatures, all of which may affect decisions about conducting remote interviews.

And don't overlook ethical issues associated with remote interviews, task force member Amy Starecheski said.

For example, how will you develop rapport with a narrator you see only on a computer screen? And what about privacy and confidentiality concerns? Could remote interviewing create opportunities for more inclusive participation in oral history projects because of greater accessibility it could afford some narrators? Will it diminish accessibility for others who can't rely on high-tech connections?

In short, there are no standard answers.

"We're all learning," Starecheski said, urging oral historians to feel empowered as they address new challenges of remote interviewing.

OHA welcomes new leaders

Oral History Association members elected the following people to leadership positions, taking effect at the annual meeting:

First Vice President Tomas Summers Sandoval of Pomona College, Claremont, California;

Council member Cynthia Tobar of Bronx Community College; and

Nominating Committee members Winona Wheeler of the University of Saskatchewan, Tara White of Wallace Community College, Selma, Alabama, and Nikki Pombier of The New School University in New York City.

OHA awards recognize exemplary work

Oral historians recognized by the Oral History Association in 2020 for outstanding work include:

Article Award to Henry Greenspan for his Oral History Review article titled “The Humanities of Contingency: Interviewing and Teaching Beyond ‘Testimony’ with Holocaust Survivors.” Judges said the piece calls for doing more than collecting experiences and instead urges people to engage deeply with narrators and their stories.

Book Award to Nepia Mahuika for his book *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition: An Indigenous Perspective*. Drawing on a case study of the Maori in New Zealand, Mahuika argues that indigenous accounts are not myths but are, in fact, legitimate forms of oral history, judges said. The panel also awarded an honorable mention to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s *Sisters and Rebels: A Struggle for the Soul of America*. Judges called the book “a page-turner about two women’s complicated and noble mission to transform the region of their birth and the United States as a whole.”

Mason Multi-Media Awards went to three projects. They are:

- *Refugee Boulevard: Making Montreal Home After the Holocaust* by Stacey Zembrzycki, Eszter Andor, Nancy Rebelo and Anna Sheftel. The project draws on oral histories with Holocaust survivors to create a survivor-led historical audio tour, accompanied by a booklet and website in French and English, including a map, historical photos and text.
- *Voices of Virginia: An Auditory Primary Source Reader* by Jessica Taylor. The project compiles oral histories from 20 repositories into an open-access reader for high school and college students, with links to download or listen to excerpts from 70 interviews. The project includes lesson plans geared to Virginia history and social science standards.
- *Wisconsin Farms: The Lands We Share Oral History Project* by Stephen Kercher and the project team. In this project, oral histories became part of a traveling exhibit and community conversations at 12 locations around the state. Oral histories conducted at five farms were highlighted in the exhibit and a related radio series.

Postsecondary Teaching Award to Ricia Anne Chansky of the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez for “Mia Maria: Puerto Rico After the Hurricane.” Interviews in this interdisciplinary project were translated and transcribed in English and Spanish. Judges said the project’s “ongoing civic engagement with the community created a place for survivors to reflect and archive their collective memories.”

National parks: places to play, places to work

If you visit Glacier National Park in Montana, you'll be awestruck by its scenic mountain grandeur. At Homestead National Monument in Nebraska, you'll marvel at pioneer families' hardships as they tried to eke out a living on never-before-plowed prairies. At Isle Royale National Park in Lake Superior, you'll meet naturalists who can explain decades-long scientific research about the wolves and moose who inhabit the remote site.

But if you're like most visitors, a panel of National Park Service historians suggested, you probably won't see the naturalists, historians, cultural interpreters and law enforcement rangers in their sharp uniforms as employees whose lives are affected by changing working conditions just as are those whose job site is a high-rise office building on a busy metropolitan street.

An NPS oral history project with the Association of National Park Rangers sheds light on workplace themes among park employees that often mirror workplace experiences in more mundane, less outdoorsy settings.

NPS Historian Lu Ann Jones told an OHA audience that in many respects, parks resemble company towns, where fellow workers seem to be like a protective, nurturing family.

But like families, workers also can exhibit less than benign behaviors, the interviews suggest, particularly after the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the subsequent women's movement when NPS employment began to reflect more demographic diversity than the white male rangers stereotypically associated with the parks.

Jones said women were subjected to patronizing treatment and sometimes were refused jobs altogether. Male rangers in some parks actively sought to undermine them, she said, citing the experience of a female law enforcement ranger in Everglades National Park, who had to rely on local hunters, not her NPS colleagues, to teach her how to operate an air boat.

The first female ranger to patrol the back country on horseback in Yosemite National Park said in her oral history interview that "if you're the first woman to do anything, they want you to fail."

Jones said African Americans and other people of color historically were excluded from the NPS workforce, but those who have been interviewed for the oral history project describe particular challenges in having to learn how to comport themselves so as not to intimidate white men. One African

American man reported receiving death threats, probably from fellow park employees. Others described the stress associated with always being the “first” or the “only” person of color among park staff.

The interviews also reflect social issues outside the parks, Jones indicated. In 2016, after an Interior Department report documented sexual harassment at Grand Canyon National Park, other staff began coming forward to talk about workplace violence, a matter park officials long tried to play down.

NPS oral histories also document challenges that remain for park employees as well as visitors 30 years after Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, historian Perri Meldon said.

Limited staff and chronic funding shortages have slowed efforts to expand access for disabled people at the 417 national park units, Meldon said, but there’s a gradual expansion of thinking about what “inclusiveness” means. Last year, a group of NPS employees formed the Employees Resource Group for the Advancement of Employees with Disabilities, and an interpretive ranger who is blind has become an advocate for training NPS staff.

The emergence of the pandemic this year also has raised access issue with the proliferation of park Zoom meetings for which visually and aurally impaired staff have had to hire their own interpreters, Meldon said.

Other oral history interviews with NPS cultural resources officers have shed light on how NPS interpreters decide what stories to tell visitors, oral historian Katie Crawford-Lackey told the audience.

Her interviews have focused in particular on interpretation of protests in parks and on public lands, such as the Bonus Army March of World War I veterans on Washington in 1932 and Martin Luther King Jr.’s Poor People’s Campaign in 1968.

Crawford-Lackey said there is very little interpretation about such protests, but park staff increasingly are moving toward a more audience-centered approach to interacting with park visitors rather than a “sage on the stage” teaching model.

Jones also noted that as NPS hires a more diverse interpretive staff, more diverse interpretation will follow.

Reporter’s notebook

By **Barbara W. Sommer**
Independent Scholar

*Editor's note: Here are highlights from several of the dozens of conference sessions oral historians could attend. Future issues of the **Newsletter** will include additional coverage of diverse conference panels and presentations.*

Celebrating a 50-Year Oral History Collaboration Between the Poarch Band of Creek Indians and the University of Florida

The session featured a 10-minute video about collaboration between the University of Florida and the Poarch Band of Creek Indians in Alabama over use of Doris Duke American Indian Oral History Project interviews with Poarch Band elders, which are held at the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida. The interviews were recorded between 1966 and 1972 as part of a national project supported by the Doris Duke Foundation to document and reclaim American Indian history. Session presenters discussed the specifics of the extensive, multi-year working relationship that made the Poarch Band materials available to Band members and use of the oral histories by the Band in many ways, including exhibitions in a new museum and monthly Evening with the Elders programs.

Panelists included: Patrick Dagaris, Oklahoma State University; Diana Dombrowski, Independent Scholar; Deborah Hendrix, University of Florida; Deidra Dees, Poarch Band of Creek Indians; Grace Chun, University of Florida and Chair Paul Ortiz, University of Florida.

Book Publishing Lives!: A

Conversation with Oral History Series Editors

This panel, for the first time, brought editors of oral history publications series together to talk about their publications, their publishers and their goals. David Cline represented Palgrave Studies in Oral History, Nancy MacKay represented the Routledge Practicing Oral History series, Mary Marshall Clark represented the new Columbia University Oral History Press series, and Anne Valk represented the Oxford University Press Oral History series. Erin Jessee of the University of Glasgow moderated the discussion.

The presenters discussed the focus and purpose of each series, the types of categories such as university presses and academic presses that each represents, the roles of series editors and how to contact them, stages for authors to be aware of in the publishing process, and national and international marketing options. The editors encouraged authors to think about the audience and the focus for a proposed publication to make it the strongest book possible. For more information about a specific press, contact the editor of that press.

Rhetoric and Reality in Museums Today: Oral History as Source, Subject, and Strategy

Participants:

Truth in Tourism: Oral History, Public Memory, and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, Roger Gatchet, West Chester University; Stephen A. King, St. Edward's University

How the Story of Birmingham Captured the Fight for Equal Voting Rights in the 1960s Alexandra Smith, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

Decolonizing Museums: An Oral History Approach, Elisabeth Grayce Rios-Brooks, University of Florida

Chair: Rachel Seidman, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

In this session, the presenters described using oral histories that

illustrate “speaking truth to power” in museum exhibitions with civil rights themes. Each presenter used an exhibition to show what truth-telling looks like and how exhibits can support social justice by de-colonizing messages and creating inclusive multi-voiced spaces. The examples varied from creating new exhibits to reviewing and adding context to existing exhibits. New or revised information included adding stories about social movements, the history of the right to vote, and context that provided a deeper understanding of visual materials. Presenters also discussed the impact of this work on civil rights heritage tourism, and Rios-Brooks, an artist and exhibit designer, showed an example of the zine she developed to help support communication outside museum walls.

Listen to Them: Community Involvement in Project Design of a Community-based Oral History Project

Mini-workshop leader Noah Schoen of Bard College (fiscal sponsor of oral history project Meanings of October 27th) focused on an oral history project documenting the community impact of the shootings at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue on Oct. 27, 2018. Schoen is a community organizer who approached the interviews with that background, stressing community partnerships that focused on how the interviews could support the community’s needs and what the project could accomplish. He described using meetings and discussions with interviewees to communicate information about the project and listen to the needs of the community while using an insider-outsider interviewing team to document the history in the interviews. He ended the session with a reminder of the importance of doing community oral history because, as he said, “we care.”

OHA annual meeting highlights

OHA members who Zoomed into the annual meeting approved a [new strategic plan](#) for the organization, formalized a new role for immediate past presidents with voting rights on the OHA Council, installed Dan Kerr as OHA president and heard updates from OHA's co-executive directors and committee chairs.

Attendees learned that:

- OHA expenses are considerably lower due to the virtual, rather than in-person, conference
- The canceled conference hotel contract saved the OHA about \$500,000
- Membership has declined from about 925 at the end of 2019 to 830, likely due to extreme economic challenges at educational and cultural institutions stemming from the pandemic
- The organization received a CARES Act grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for approximately \$43,000, which supported additional staffing needs for the virtual conference
- The OHA endowment has about \$532,000
- Spanish and Chinese translations of the OHA's "Principles and Best Practices" have been completed and will be available on the OHA website
- Developed remote interviewing resources, available on the OHA website <https://www.oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/>
- Members can expect a significant virtual component for the 2021 annual meeting and conference, scheduled for Cincinnati, Ohio. In-person components of the event remain undetermined.

OHA Metadata Task Force announces new collaboration

The Oral History Association announced a partnership with the Metropolitan New York Library Council, known as METRO, to develop and host an Oral History Metadata Elements and Workflow Project, which will be built on METRO's open source repository system called Archipelago.

OHA Metadata Task Force chair Steven Sielaff introduced the partnership in a video presentation at the OHA annual meeting.

The OHA's memorandum of understanding with METRO will enable oral historians to use the online tool to determine what metadata they want

to collect about their interviews. The tool allows users to choose from an existing list of metadata elements, but users also can add their own, said Natalie Milbrodt of the Queens Public Library.

Task force member Lauren Kata said the metadata task force is committed to developing tools that will help oral historians determine what metadata is important to record when creating oral histories.

“We believe strongly that metadata is important for discoverability, accessibility and understanding for oral history projects,” she said.

Heartfelt thanks to donors

Dozens of conference sponsors, contributors, donors and supporters of the OHA Endowment Fund make possible the ongoing work of the Oral History Association. To them, a big vote of thanks! For a complete list of OHA supporters see pages 7 and 8 of the OHA Conference Program, available here: https://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Program-Booklet-Final_Reduced-File-Size.pdf

2021 OHA conference planners invite proposals

“Moving Stories” is the theme for the 2021 Oral History Association conference set for Oct. 13-17 in Cincinnati, Ohio. It is expected to feature a significant virtual component, but some in-person participation is also under consideration.

Either way, oral historians around the world are invited to submit proposals for papers, panels, workshops, performances or other forms of presentation about their work. Complete details are available here: <https://www.oralhistory.org/2021-call-for-papers/>

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Co-Executive Directors' Column

By Kristine McCusker

We want to thank everyone who made the Oral History Association's first virtual conference such a stunning success. We were grateful to the Program Committee, especially chairs Shanna Farrell and Kelly Navies, for organizing such a robust program. We also loved the virtual visit to Baltimore, thanks to the Local Arrangements chairs, Linda Shopes and Catherine Mayfield. Dan Kerr oversaw the entire process, and Allison Tracy-Taylor continued the Council's strong support of these plans. Anna Kaplan was a tremendous help before, during and after the event, helping the Executive Office design and manage the conference, and the intrepid Faith Bagley made sure there were so few glitches in the execution of the conference.

As a follow-up to the conference, we are also reaching out to conference panelists to publish some of the conference sessions as a sort of virtual conference proceedings. This will be funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities CARES Act grant we received. Stay tuned for more information. In the meantime, did you miss a panel? If you registered for the conference, you can still access conference sessions through the Attendify app.

The obvious question, now, is what about next year? The answer is: we don't know. There is still so much uncertainty because the situation with covid changes so rapidly. As we learn more, we will make sure to update the membership via the monthly News Blasts and via newsletters. Know that we are carefully watching the situation and planning strategically for any eventuality.

The end of the year is coming, so please update your memberships and help keep the OHA moving forward into 2021. Stay safe and best wishes for the end of the year.

President's Letter

By Daniel Kerr

The year 2020 has been a year of crisis, trauma and resilience. In his introduction to the edited collection, *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (2014), Mark Cave leads off with a statement that feels more true now than ever before, "Crisis is a historical constant." He continues, "Our thoughts are consumed by daily routine or captured by the next headline. What remains when the cameras turn away, and reporters go home, are individuals and communities in the process of redefinition." Cave makes a compelling case that oral history as a methodology is well suited to explore this longer-term process of change.

That could not be truer today. With that said, the speed, pace and magnitude of crisis in 2020 have not only left communities in a state of redefinition, they have left our very practice and the Oral History Association itself in a transformed state. The OHA is in the midst of a major change, as we seek to expand our relevance and impact and further our mission and vision as articulated in our newly adopted Strategic Plan:

Mission Statement: The Oral History Association (OHA) is a dynamic crossroads of ideas and people, connecting and inspiring practitioners, and supporting their work to ethically collect, preserve, share, and interpret memories which foster knowledge and respect.

Vision Statement: We envision a world where a deep humanistic understanding of the past, developed through a process of listening and mutual respect, shapes a more inclusive and equitable future.

In our commitment to gather together in the midst of this pandemic, the OHA pulled together one of our most successful conferences to date with a near record number of attendees and presenters. The conference theme, *The Quest for Democracy: One Hundred Years of Struggle*, could not be timelier. We heard repeatedly from the post-conference survey that the sessions were profound, impactful and field altering. Nearly every one of the sessions has been recorded and transcribed, creating unprecedented levels of access to all of the presentations. Those sessions will be available through Attendify through next summer.

We had huge numbers of volunteers who attended the conference for free and did a tremendous amount of work to host and edit transcriptions. Significant numbers of presenters followed our new guidelines on making PowerPoints and other visuals accessible. Almost every session had a live transcript and our feature sessions had live American Sign Language translation. We embraced our commitment to making the OHA broadly accessible and impactful.

While we remain dedicated to holding in-person gatherings in the future, we will need to be creative to find ways to use new tools to continue our commitment to making our gatherings as accessible as possible. With that said, our virtual success depended on the strong relationships we have built with one another over the years of gathering in person. While our avatars in Second Life may dance better, dancing together in real life requires much deeper levels of engagement.

Planning for annual conferences starts nearly three years prior to the meeting and begins in earnest a year and a half prior to our coming together. We are already well underway with our plans for 2021. Vice President Amy Starecheski, program co-chairs Nikki Yeboah and Sara Sinclair, and local arrangements co-chairs Gwen Etter-Lewis and Tracy McDonough are busy pulling together what promises to be an extraordinary conference focusing on the theme *Moving Stories*. It is time to work on your proposals and organize your sessions. At this moment, it is our preference not to hold an in-person conference. However, we need to work with the hotel that we have contracted with in Cincinnati to create an acceptable solution for both sides before we can make a final decision on the meeting format.

At the October business meeting, we passed [our new Strategic Plan](#). Tomás Summers Sandoval Jr., Allison Tracy-Taylor and Cynthia Tobar are leading the Organizational Restructuring Task Force to look closely at our committee structure to see how we might organize the OHA most effectively to further the goals of the plan. We ask all of our current committee members to participate in this process, and we expect to start implementing these changes by March and formalizing them in the Constitution and Bylaws at our annual meeting next year.

We have a lot of heavy lifting to do to achieve our goals and would value your active participation. Please let us know if you are interested in participating in our current committees. We will find a place for you as our committee structure changes: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeSx8eNi2htvRQoRgTq-ZKrSAOb-LJjekMLv5vpFlvUP2KFQ/viewform?usp=sf_link.

In January, we will move into our fourth year of a five-year contract with Middle Tennessee State University, which houses our executive office. Kris McCusker and Louis Kyriakoudes, our co-executive directors, have done a tremendous job and have dedicated countless hours of time to the OHA. Understandably, they have both decided that they want to focus on other projects after their five-year commitment ends. With their support, we will begin a search for a new Executive Office next year. We expect to put out a Request for Proposals in the late spring or early summer of next year. Until then, start thinking about whether you may be interested in being the OHA's next executive director.

Immediately, we have a critical need for a new treasurer. Kristine Navarro-McElhaney, to whom the OHA will be forever indebted, resigned as treasurer because she now serves as the vice-president and president-elect for the National Council of Public History. Please consider applying to be the treasurer. The six-year position receives an annual stipend of \$2,000 and

is reimbursed for travel expenses to the annual meetings. Let us know right now if you are interested: <https://www.oralhistory.org/2020/11/11/wanted-a-new-oha-treasurer/>

As the planet around us is in the midst of great turmoil and change, we cannot stand by as spectators. Oral history, rooted in deep listening, empathy and open-endedness, is needed now more than ever. Grab your microphones, recorders, metadata synchronizing tools and editing software, and let's get to work building a better world!