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Community Oral History Projects in Kentucky: Is Anyone Listening?

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archivally safe folders and boxes and placed in a room where the temperature and humidity is strictly controlled. Finding guides will describe the contents of each collection and indexes for broad subjects will lead the researcher to the microfilm for the appropriate collections.

The grant will deplete the large backlog of unprocessed photographs and consequently will allow the Photographic Archives to actively seek out materials to be added to the collections. Anyone who can assist the Archives in their collecting is urged to contact Gerry Munoff.

The Photographic Archives will regularly display photographs in a new exhibition area in Special Collections. An exhibit of Edward Curtis' photographs of North American Indians is planned for early this spring.

The staff of the Photographic Archives will be very happy to talk with anyone who has knowledge of available photographs that might be suitable for inclusion in the Archives or who needs assistance with the preservation and care of their own historical photographs. The address is Photographic Archives, University of Kentucky Libraries, Lexington, Kentucky 40506; the phone number is (606)258-8634.

COMMUNITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS IN KENTUCKY: IS ANYONE LISTENING?

The recent Kentucky Conference on Oral History held in Lexington, Kentucky abundantly demonstrated that Kentuckians have an active interest in oral history. Participants came from the state's colleges and universities, local libraries and historical societies, state agencies and local communities.

There can be little doubt that the Kentucky Oral History Commission has rendered commendable service by publicizing oral history and giving it visibility in local communities. In addition, through grants the Commission has enabled the state's established oral history programs to initiate additional projects. Sponsorship of the statewide conference was yet another valuable service of the Commission.

A conference session entitled "Community Oral History Projects" addressed particular problems that have consistently plagued the development of community oral histories. Kim Lady, State Coordinator of the Commission, suggested that perhaps we have reached a point where quality should be emphasized over quantity. Under the auspices of the Commission, over 1500 tapes from the state's local communities have been collected. The quality of these tapes varies widely and their utilization for research has been negligible. Lady emphasized that most tapes from the local communities lack specific direction or conceptualization of historical topics.

Mike Averdick, Associate Director of the Kenton County Public Library, gave a local view of the community oral history projects. One of the most difficult problems, he pointed out, is finding volunteer interviewers. This appears to be a statewide pattern. Averdick maintained that while he and other librarians are vitally interested in the success of local oral history projects, they lack sufficient time to devote to such endeavors.

Jim Hammack, Director of the Forrest C. Pogue Oral History Institute, described an approach to community oral history which has been initiated at Murray State University. In cooperation with eight counties in the area, they are attempting to interview a cross section of local citizens for the Jackson Purchase Oral History Project. A manual has been produced with information and guidelines for interviewees. Hammack is attempting to address several specific historical questions in this project.

Other Level I or university and college programs have been involved in what could be considered local history projects. At Alice Lloyd College, Western Kentucky University, the University of Kentucky, Eastern Kentucky University and the University of Louisville, Level I programs have satisfactorily conducted such projects. Also, many Level I directors have volunteered their services as consultants to local projects.

The success of community oral histories operated by the local public libraries has varied from one community to another. With only two full-time employees, the Commission has been forced to rely heavily upon local librarians and volunteers. Few of these individuals have the time, experience or in some instances the inclination to devote to the local projects the attention they need or deserve. Efforts to alleviate this situation through regional workshops or summer grant programs have not been successful.

For the most part, the Level I programs have been productive and have experienced substantial use by researchers. Perhaps a closer working relationship between the state's colleges and universities and local oral history projects is the answer. Surely professional practitioners at the college and university level would be willing to work with local communities in their areas to initiate and conduct such projects. Their role could be one of consultant and would lead to a wider dissemination of information throughout the region.

This approach could be implemented through existing Level I programs. However, an effort should be made to include the state's community colleges, thus reaching into virtually all areas of the state. At institutions where oral history projects do not already exist, social science and humanities teachers could be encouraged to initiate them, using their students as the primary interviewers. Thus oral history could be utilized as a learning tool as well as a means of historic preservation.

Local history must not be slighted either by the Kentucky Oral History Commission or by the state's various Level I oral history programs. We cannot afford to approach its preservation in a halfhearted or haphazard manner. Perhaps a solution lies in better utilization of our existing educational institutions to provide specific training both in historical methodology and in oral history techniques.

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