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The Genesis of Kentucky’s Oral History Commission

John Ed Pearce

In a curious way Allan Trout, one of the greatest newspapermen Kentucky ever produced, was instrumental in the creation of the Kentucky Oral History Commission. A columnist for the Louisville Courier-Journal, Allan was, in his frequent role as a recorder of tradition, folklore, and anecdote, a representative of the old oral tradition in literature. It was on 8 December 1972 that Allan Trout died, and not long afterward I had a memorable conversation with AI Smith, then a publisher of newspapers in Russellville, Kentucky. We were both touched through Kentucky’s loss in the death of Allan—especially since he had left so few papers to preserve his experiences, works, and memories, and his unsurpassed store of Kentucky folklore. Al agreed that an effort should be made to establish an agency that would go out into Kentucky and record the memories of people while they were here to tell younger generations how things had been, and to shed light on the little side roads of history that are not described in the formal history books.

A few months later I attempted to persuade Barry Bingham, publisher of the Louisville newspapers, to endow a commission, preferably at the University of Kentucky, to undertake such a mission. Unfortunately for my plans, he had received a similar request from Douglas Nunn, representing the University of Louisville, and, since his first loyalties lay with the University of Louisville, Bingham made a grant to that institution. I gave the matter little thought after that until two years later when Bingham decided that those responsible for the program at the university had not made satisfactory progress and recalled remaining funds.

When I heard of this I again approached Al Smith, and we discussed the continuing need for such an agency. It was Al’s opinion that it would be more feasible to seek state financing than private contributions, especially since the state was preparing to observe (somewhat prematurely) a bicentennial. Al believed that a
commission to record oral history would be attractive to the governor, at the time Julian Carroll, as part of a Kentucky Bicentennial, and the two of us drew up a proposal for a Kentucky Bicentennial Oral History Commission. Governor Carroll proved enthusiastic and encouraged us to draw a specific plan that could be proposed to the General Assembly for enactment into a supporting law. We did, he gave the proposal his endorsement, and on 30 March 1976 the legislature established the Kentucky Bicentennial Oral History Commission (that name alone should have been enough to sink it) with Albert Smith as chairman, John Ed Pearce as vice-chairman, State Librarian Charles Hinds as executive secretary, Kentucky Historical Society Director Gen. William Buster as state history advisor, and Dr. Forrest Pogue as oral history advisor. On 2 April 1976, eighteen members of the commission were named to represent institutions, chiefly universities, and ten at-large members were added. I think I ought to put some emphasis here on the consistent support of Julian Carroll, without whom the commission could not have been created.

We had our first working meeting on 6 August 1976 at the State Library building, then at Berry Hill, Frankfort, and named Margaret Price, of Lexington, to be our first director, or coordinator, as she was known. I had envisioned an independent agency that would help establish oral history committees, possibly through local libraries or historical societies, in every county, with interested citizens helping to select projects and choose interviewers who would go out into the county and collect memoirs of people, not necessarily prominent people, but those who had valuable memories and possibly documents, letters, photographs, and so forth, that might be lost with their passing. I had hoped that in this way we could encourage the compilation of data for county histories and for future state historians.

A program of this nature was established working through the county libraries. Each library was provided with a recorder and cassettes and worked with the commission coordinator to organize local committees. Unfortunately, Kentucky’s absurd system of 120 counties plagued the progress of this statewide program just as it has countless others. The program met with limited success and commission activity on the county level was redirected into a technical assistance grant program in 1988. This allows for more direct supervision of oral history activity in communities.
throughout the state, but does not encourage the kind of community involvement or comprehensive collection I had originally envisioned.

No one shared my view of our mission. From the beginning Al Smith and other commission members wanted a more formal structure that would operate principally through state colleges, universities, or other public agencies. These would sponsor applicants who would propose oral history projects and apply to the commission for grants to carry them out. The sponsoring agency would help bear the project costs, either by direct aid to the grant recipient, or aid-in-kind, such as office space, storage, or telephones. (This looked good in theory, but in practice I think the Oral History Commission bore just about all costs.) Grant recipients were required to make periodic progress reports, complete projects by a specified time, and furnish the commission with a copy of all tapes. The commission would then duplicate the tapes and return the originals to the grant recipient for storage in the sponsoring institution or other specified repository.

This worked pretty well. Several times recipients failed to make reports or to complete their project on time, and we found that there was not much we could do about it short of cancelling the unspent portion of the grant and accepting nothing for money already spent. That tended to make us cautious about grants. But most recipients were emotionally, intellectually, and professionally involved in their project, worked conscientiously, and produced valuable tapes.

At our first annual meeting several university representatives raised heated objection to the requirement that the recipients of grants furnish the commission with tapes of all interviews. While this seemed, and seems to me now, only sensible, a compromise was reached. Universities or other institutions which could provide proper storage and access to interviews could keep sole possession of the tapes, but were required to submit a detailed inventory of the interviews to the commission for the eventual purpose of compiling and producing a union catalogue.

People in state government had a hard time deciding what they wanted the commission to be and do. On 27 July 1981, Gov. John Y. Brown changed the name simply to the Kentucky Oral History Commission, and attached it to the Kentucky Historical Society for administrative purposes, with thirty members, of whom nine would constitute the executive committee, with the governor
naming five, the commission four. On 1 July 1982, the legislature established the commission as an independent agency and changed the membership to twelve, with five appointed by the governor and five by the Legislative Research Commission. The state librarian and the director of the Kentucky Historical Society were named as ex-officio members. It was later declared unconstitutional for the legislature to appoint commission members and the governor now appoints ten.

Furthermore, since 1982, every time the legislature considered our budget request some lawmaker decided we should be merged with some other agency—the Historical Society, the Arts Council, the Library—usually for economy reasons. I have always been against this, and I still am. The state saves no money by making the commission part of a department. Furthermore, if you put the commission under some agency that does not understand what the commission does, you are going to lose the unpaid service of a lot of good people.

On 12 August 1977, Margaret Price resigned as coordinator in order to attend law school, and she was succeeded the next month by Deborah McGuffey. Enoch Harned, a sight-impaired CETA worker, was employed to help the coordinator in cataloguing oral history tapes. I should make some special mention here of Enoch. When he was first mentioned for the job, I could not appreciate how a sight-impaired person could handle the precise filing and typing jobs. And I could not have been more wrong. He has proved to be a great asset to this small agency, handling an amazing variety of tasks, from preparing descriptions of interviews maintained by the commission to assuming responsibility for the operation of the agency in the absence of the director. On 1 November 1979, Al Smith and Deborah McGuffey resigned. Al had been named executive director of the Appalachian Regional Commission and left for Washington, D.C., taking McGuffey with him as assistant. Dr. Robert Martin, a member of the Kentucky Senate and former president of Eastern Kentucky University, was chosen chairman to succeed him. McGuffey left on 16 December 1979 and was succeeded by Kimberly Lady (now Smith), who served as coordinator until 1982, when agency status required that she be named director. Harned was given the title oral history coordinator. They constituted the entire staff, carrying the whole work load of the commission until a part-time secretary was hired in August 1988.
Dr. Martin resigned in 1981 to devote himself to re-election to the state Senate, and I, John Ed Pearce, became chairman, serving until 1989, when Dr. Lynwood Montell, of Western Kentucky University, agreed to take the post. There was never much competition for the job. It entails a lot of work, considerable travel, and no pay. Originally the commission received an annual budget of $50,000 from the legislature. In 1982 this was increased to $75,000, and this year it will total $110,500. In my opinion, the state has gotten its money's worth. Over the past thirteen years more than fifty able, knowledgeable, and dedicated Kentuckians have served on the commission. Don't ask me why. The job pays nothing and takes a lot of time and effort. I know of no other agency of the state in recent years that operated on less than $50,000 a year, a fact largely due to the willingness of such people as Dr. Thomas D. Clark, the state's senior historian, to serve at considerable expense and without compensation.

In an average year the commission will approve from ten to fifteen major grants of from $500 to $5,000 for projects ranging from the views of former teachers and school superintendents to blacks' memories of preintegration days, and the memoirs of residents of Eastern Kentucky coal towns now gone and largely forgotten. It has lent assistance to individual and group taping enterprises in over 100 communities throughout the state, and has helped collect and now stores over 3,500 oral history tapes. Contained in these tapes are interviews with everyone from lay midwives to state officials, miners, farmers, housewives, and small-town business and community leaders. All of these tapes are available to the public at the Department of Libraries and Archives building on Coffee Tree Road in Frankfort. The commission is currently at work on a guide to all the estimated 20,000 oral history interviews in the state, a project funded in part by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

While the policies of the commission have not always pleased everyone, they have generally served, I believe, as an incentive for the development of viable oral history programs and have built interest in collecting and saving state history. Through the efforts of Ms. Smith, the commission has applied professional standards to its grants program, initiated a newsletter, organized well-attended state oral history conferences, and taken an active role in the national Oral History Association, which held its 1984 annual
meeting in Lexington. Kentucky is, in fact, the only state in the union with this kind of state-supported commission, and its programs have earned Kentucky a great deal of publicity and respect from other states and among historical and academic groups.

I would like to see the Kentucky Oral History Commission extend its programs out into the state a little more, and to see it encourage formation of grassroots oral history groups. And I hope someday that the commission will have enough money to transcribe these tapes. This would make their contents much easier of access and increase their value to future historians. Otherwise, I'm fairly pleased, as I think Allan Trout would be, with the thing that Al Smith and I created thirteen years ago. I think it will prove of great value to the state in the future, especially during the upcoming 1992 bicentennial year.