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The University of Kentucky Oral History Program: Recording History for the Present and the Future

Jeffrey S. Suchanek

In 1944, [Fred Vinson] invited me for lunch. He was the economic czar of Roosevelt's last campaign. And that morning I had a conference with Roosevelt. And when Fred and I sat down to dinner, I said, "Fred, the President's sick." "Oh," he said, "you've been listening to these damn Republicans." I said, "No. I just left him. And I'll guarantee he didn't know who I was. He didn't know what I was saying. If you go down there, he won't know that I'd been there." We elected a dead man in 1944.

[Interview with John Y. Brown, Sr., on 9 March 1976 for the Fred Vinson Oral History Project]

Oral history, the process of electronically recording the memories of individuals, has become recognized as a valuable resource by researchers and scholars. The past twenty years have witnessed a rapid growth in the use of oral history by serious scholars in their publications. Many major research institutions, such as Columbia University and the University of California at Los Angeles, now have significant oral history collections. The Oral History Program at the University of Kentucky, established in 1973, is nationally recognized for both the quantity and quality of its oral history interviews. The Oral History Collection contains over three thousand interviews under sixty-four general topical headings encompassing over five thousand actual interview hours. The Oral History Program is an integral part of the Department of Special Collections and Archives at the University of Kentucky Libraries; it helps the department fulfill its mission of collecting, preserving,
and making available materials that document the history and culture of Kentucky and Kentuckians.

The libraries' oral history collection has doubled in size over the past five years, and use of it by researchers has accelerated proportionately. The subject matter encompassed in the collection and the quality of the interviews has drawn the attention of nationally recognized scholars and writers such as William Leuchtenburg (In The Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan), Carl Brauer (John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction), David O'Brien (Storm Center: The Supreme Court in American Politics), Sidney Fine (Frank Murphey: The Washington Years), George Blakey (Hard Times and the New Deal in Kentucky), Charles and Barbara Whalen (The Longest Debate: A Legislative History of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill), John G. Greene (The Presidential Election of 1952), Clarice Mitchiner (John Sherman Cooper: Consummate Statesman), John Ed Pearce (Divide and Dissent: Kentucky Politics, 1930-1963), and Frances Howell Rudko (Truman’s Court: A Study in Judicial Restraint). The Oral History Collection continues to grow at the rate of three hundred interviews per year, steadily increasing the university's visibility and attracting more interest among the national academic community.

The first thing a courier had to do was transportation—which, in those days, meant horses. It meant taking care of horses and taking care of sick horses and guiding a doctor to a lonely hollow. We had to know the whole area well and all the paths, for there were very few roads. Such as they were, dirt roads. And no automobiles were in the whole county. We also had to know the fords so that you wouldn’t get in a hole and get everything wet. But, when we did have to swim, we would take the saddlebags off and put them over our shoulders so that the contents would not get wet. We also had to try out new horses to see if they were suitable for the nurses. They had to be gentle for one thing, because the nurses were marvelous nurses but not necessarily marvelous horsewomen, and the couriers had to be pretty good on horses. And, also, we had to make sure that their gaits were soft so they wouldn’t break the bottles. We didn’t have plastic bottles in those days—they were all glass. And a horse with a hard gait might break the bottles of medicines.
and things that the nurses had with them. So, we would try out the horses and then assign them to the nurses.

[Interview with Marvin Breckinridge Patterson on 13 May 1978 for the Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project]

Many of the interviews in the Oral History Collection supplement existing manuscript, archival, and audio-visual collections within the Department of Special Collections and Archives, giving researchers access to information in a variety of formats. For example, one of the largest projects in the Oral History Collection is the Alumni/Faculty Oral History Project. This project contains over 500 interviews with former University of Kentucky students, faculty, and administrators, beginning with the turn of the century and continuing to the present. Included in this project are interviews with former University of Kentucky presidents Frank G. Dickey, John W. Oswald, and Otis A. Singletary. The project also includes interviews with A. D. Albright, Lyman Ginger, Betty Kirwan, Sarah B. Holmes, Thomas D. Clark, Amry Vandenbosch, Sarah G. Blanding, David C. Scott, James W. Martin, Louie B. Nunn, Lewis W. Cochran, Lyman T. Johnson, Elvis J. Stahr, Jr., and William R. Willard, to name but a few. These extensive interviews supplement written records deposited in the University Archives.

The Oral History Collection also contains over five hundred interviews with Kentucky politicians such as former United States Senator and ambassador John Sherman Cooper, former United States Supreme Court Justice Stanley F. Reed, former United States Senator and Governor of Kentucky Earle C. Clements, former United States Senator, two-time Governor of Kentucky, and Major League Baseball Commissioner A.B. “Happy” Chandler, former Governor of Kentucky Lawrence Wetherby, former United States Senator Thruston B. Morton, former advisor to presidents and governors Edward F. Prichard, Jr., and former United States Housing Expediter, lieutenant-governor of Kentucky, and mayor of Louisville Wilson W. Wyatt. Included in this project are interviews with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, James Farley, Strom Thurmond, Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson, John Kenneth Galbraith, Bert T. Combs, Wendell Ford, J. William Fulbright, William Greider, Stuart Symington, Carl Curtis, Jennings Randolph, Mark Hatfield, Lawrence E. Forgy, Jr., and Howard Baker, Jr. These interviews
supplement existing manuscript collections, such as the papers of John Sherman Cooper, Earle C. Clements, A.B. “Happy” Chandler, Stanley F. Reed, Fred M. Vinson, and Thruston B. Morton, which are all located in the Modern Political Papers Archives in the Department of Special Collections.

The ninety interviews contained in the Kentucky Writers Oral History Project include extensive interviews with Robert Penn Warren, John Jacob Niles, and Harriet Arnow. These interviews supplement existing manuscript collections, such as the papers of Robert Penn Warren, John Jacob Niles, and Grant C. Knight, as well as many recordings, photographs, and films in the Audio-Visual Archives. The 194 interviews in the Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project supplement the papers of the Frontier Nursing Service, and the over 400 interviews in the Appalachian Oral History Project supplement the libraries’ nationally recognized Appalachian Collection. Included in this project are interviews with the late B. F. Reed, Willard Stanley, James L. Rose, George Evans, William Sturgill, James Daniel, Norman Yarborough, and Samuel M. Cassidy. These interrelated collections have helped to bring about a national awareness among academicians of the prominent role played by Kentuckians in the political, social, economic, and cultural history of the United States.

And I was operating a loading machine, and . . . that bottom coal broke, and it had me covered up. I expected the slate to come along and maybe kill me, you know? And I’ll tell you, [I] called on the good Lord! I said, “I need some help here!” I said it to myself, you know, just thinking in my mind. And I wasn’t a Christian then, which shook me to thinking [that], you know, I should have been . . . Anyhow, I went to kicking and broke that stuff loose, and I crawled out from under. I wasn’t even hurt. Maybe, you know, a little scratch or something. I could just as easily have been killed.

[Interview with James Ward on 18 November 1988 for the Coal Mining Oral History Project]

The interest in oral history among academicians as a valuable research tool continues to accelerate. There has been a recognition among scholars from many disciplines that the written records often do not offer a comprehensive picture of the lives and
motivations of people and events that have shaped American history and society. Oral history cannot, and is not intended to, take the place of the written record. Important avenues of the historian always have been, and probably will remain, written documents such as letters, diaries, court records, newspapers, church records, business records, or other sources. While most written documents are regarded as permanent and authentic by the academic community, the oral history interview provides a new technique for validating and filling in the gaps in the written historical record, or, in fact, becoming the only record when no written documentation exists. Oral history interviews also can provide social and cultural information not available elsewhere. Written records often give researchers only the “bare bones” of history. Oral history helps to personalize history, to flesh out the “bare bones.” Written records often do not tell us much about a person or an event, hence researchers may appeal to oral history as an alternative method when seeking information. Formal records often do not tell researchers much about people’s everyday lives, what guided people’s decisions, why people made the choices they made, who people voted for and why, what people believed in and why, or what contribution an individual made to society. These are all questions oral history can help to answer.

The interviews in the Oral History Collection at the University of Kentucky provide scholars access to information not found anywhere else. Scholars can learn from Senator John Sherman Cooper’s interviews why Cooper was one of the first senators to oppose the war in Vietnam. In the Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project, scholars can learn what it was really like to ride horseback through the mountains of eastern Kentucky in the 1920s and 1930s to provide basic health care to rural Kentucky families. By reading the transcript of the Alumni/Faculty interview with Betty Tevis Eckdahl, researchers interested in the history of education will discover what it was like to be a female student on the campus of the University of Kentucky during World War II. Interviews with the late Robert Penn Warren provide clues and insights into the motivation behind the classic works of American literature and poetry. The interviews in the Appalachian Oral History Project provide much information not only on coal mining from the perspectives of the coal miner and the coal mine operator, but also information on family structure, gender roles, community relationships, and value systems in the coal camps of
eastern Kentucky. The interview with Audrey Louise Grevious for the Ethnicity in Lexington Oral History Project, which appears in this issue of *The Kentucky Review*, clearly illustrates what life was like for a black person in Lexington during the 1950s. Indeed, the interviews in the Oral History Collection provide valuable information for scholars in many academic disciplines. Oral history has become so interdisciplinary that it has been embraced not only by historians, but by anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, Appalachian scholars, conservationists, medical professionals, educators, school teachers, and genealogists.

Napalm injuries. I remember those. How bad they smelled, and some of that stays. Gee, I doubt if anybody over there missed having the experience of taking . . . the medical people anyway, of taking care of people whose village was accidentally napalmed. How often that must have happened. And the people that came in, they were beyond recognition. And we knew we were just taking care of them long enough to have them die. I didn't expect that. I didn't expect that to look that way or smell that way or to see people . . . to look at living people and know they were dead. I'd never done that with anybody before. They were the first ones.

[Interview with Judy Hartline Elbring on 10 June 1985 for the Vietnam Veterans in Kentucky Oral History Project]

The importance of oral history to various academic disciplines will continue to grow well into the future. Given today's fast-paced lifestyles and advanced technology, not many people have the time or inclination to write long personal correspondences or keep daily diaries. This type of primary source material will not be available in sufficient quantities to the next generation of scholars when studying the twentieth century. Scholars of the future will need alternative sources of information to personalize the written records. The Oral History Program at the University of Kentucky is attempting to fill that need. The libraries' oral history collection is a collection for the present and for the future, and it contributes significantly to the University of Kentucky's reputation as a major research institution.