

INTERVIEW WITH MARTHA ROSS

The 1982 Forrest Pogue award for distinguished contributions to the field of oral history will be presented to Martha Ross at the November 6 meeting of OHMAR. At that meeting she will speak on "Oral History: Teaching and Learning," and will be the guest of honor at a dinner open to all OHMAR members and friends later that evening.

In connection with the award, newsletter editor Donald Ritchie interviewed Martha Ross on Friday, September 3, 1982. Excerpts from that interview follow:

Q: Martha, you have probably been instrumental in starting more people in oral history than any other person I know. How did you get started in oral history?

A: On the one hand, it was a fluke, a happenstance, and on the other it was a logical development from a lot of activities I had done for a long time. When my sixth child went to first grade, I threw up my hands, said "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty I'm free at last!" and looked for something to do.

I really wanted to sort through my interests and to find out which ones I should relegate to the category of hobbies, and which I might want to develop more seriously, professionally, with the rest of my life.

I had been involved in writing and interviewing. I had edited my high school newspaper; I had edited my college yearbook; I had been a columnist for my college newspaper; I contributed a column to my hometown newspaper; I had worked for the Birmingham newspaper as a stringer. So I had written and interviewed people literally throughout my adolescence and adulthood....All my life I have been in one way or another doing

interviews, and enjoying a genuine interest in people and their experiences.

In the fall of 1969, when Maria went to first grade, George Washington University was just in the second year of a program for just such a person as myself. It was a program called "Developing New Horizons for Women".... This was really an excellent program. It was a fifteen week course involving extensive testing and then teaching students how to interpret the testing....And as part of this program, each of us had to develop a paper on a profession in which women could satisfactorily

be involved, where there was not terrible discrimination, where there were not physical barriers, and so forth. Over all this period of time, I knew that I wanted to be involved somehow in communications, because I am, as you know, a big talker.I was interested in perhaps something like educational television, developing programs. But as we went around the room and people were talking about what papers they were planning to do, one of my colleagues said that she was going to write a paper on educational television. I thought, "Well,

Martha, you can't do that, there can't be two papers in this small group on educational television." So I thought, "Well, back to the drawing board."

Here is where fortune stepped in. In the Washington Post over that weekend, was an article on the slave narratives in the Library of Congress, and I was exposed for the first time to the term "oral history." That was, I can pinpoint the date, late November 1969. I immediately called the Library of Congress, asked the person at the switchboard to put me in touch with any oral historian who was there, and there was a momentary pause. She switched and I later found out it was Alan Jabbour



who answered and said: "Folksong." Then I was put in touch with Don Leavitt, he was then in the Recorded Sound Section, and we had a nice discussion. He said that I should certainly get in touch with Peter Olch at the National Library of Medicine, and with Louis Starr at Columbia, and perhaps with the presidential libraries. Don Leavitt really was my first contact.

I made an appointment to talk to Peter Olch. I went over and he said, "Well, you're just a couple of weeks too late. The Oral History Association just had its annual meeting at Airlie House." So by just a few weeks I missed the Airlie House meeting, with the legendary putting the goat in Ben Frank's room and people falling in the swimming pool and all those kinds of things. /Martha also contacted the Johnson Library, Larry Hackman, and the Columbia Oral History Research Office/....

The upshot of this whole thing is that I put all of this together in a paper for this course, and I entitled it "Oral History: Tomorrow's Occupation Today." It was a sensation at George Washington. They all, of course, wanted to be interviewed! The director of the program, Dr. /Ruth/ Osborn, said, "Well, would you do an oral history project of my program?" It was the first group guidance and counseling program for mature women having been developed in the country. I said, "Sure, why not?"....

I got swept up by Dr. Osborn and her excitement about my doing an oral history of her program, which I proceeded to do. Then one of the things she did in the last few classes of this course was to have previous attendees and also women who were in interesting jobs come back and talk to the class. She was kind enough to invite me to come back and talk to some of her later classes. She was struck by the number of her students who would come up and ask me more questions about oral history. So she said, "I'd like you to teach a course." I said, "What! I'm just learning about it myself!" And she said, "Who else is available? Who else knows more about it?" I said, "Well, I certainly don't know enough about it, but let me look into it and see if I can accumulate a little more information, and we'll keep in touch." In the meantime, I was proceeding with interviews for her. /Martha was then introduced to Meta Armstrong, a member of another class who also had become interested in oral history/....

We decided, under Dr. Osborn's ins-
tion, to attend the Oral History Associa-
Colloquium out in Monterey, California, and
see if we could talk with people who were
in fact teaching already. This would have
been Charlie Morrissey, Carlotta Mellon,
Gary Shumway. We decided that we would get
ourselves to California and survey the teach-
ing of oral history and see if we could pro-
pose a course. I will never forget the first
day of the colloquium, we were coming up to
the auditorium and there was Peter Olch. I
said, "Hello, Peter." And he said, "Martha
Ross! What are you doing here?" Lately he
was introducing me to oral history in his
office, and all of a sudden we meet on the
other side of the country.

Well, to make a very long story short,
Meta and I began teaching in January 1971.
We taught again in the fall of 1971, and we
taught in the spring of 1972. All of this
for George Washington. One of our students
was Mary Jo Deering. We had the great plea-
sure of having Betty Mason come down as a
guest speaker; Forrest Pogue was a guest
speaker. We mostly scrounged on our expert
friends who would come and speak. But we
began developing this kind of synthesis of
expert opinion, and teaching women, most of
whom were highly motivated for one reason or
another....

At the time I began doing this, I real-
ized that I needed to have additional train-
ing myself. As a part-time staff person at
George Washington, I could have had some of
my graduate expenses there underwritten. I
looked into their program and I found it
heavily weighted at that time in European and
diplomatic history, and nothing much in
twentieth century American history, which I
could tell was going to be my field. I got
catalogs from Catholic U, American U, and
also the University of Maryland. The Mary-
land program definitely looked good to me....
/At Maryland/ I had the pleasure of sitting
in Walter Rundell's first class that he taught
when he came to Maryland as chairman from
Iowa State. He had done some oral history
in Iowa. He knew what oral history was.
Naturally, when I had a choice for his sem-
inar I turned in papers about oral history.
At the end of that class he asked if I would
come to Maryland and teach. I was happy to
do so, since it would be a credit course.
I might say that I've lived happily ever
after, but that would be a gross over-
simplification.

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A: Of course, I'm the eternal optimist, so my natural knee-jerk answer would be of course changes are all for the better. The Oral History Association has been trying very hard and very diligently and very determinedly to raise the professional sights, to raise professional standards, to raise the consciousness of people to what professional oral history is versus the journalistic approach of taking an interview and using it for something and calling it oral history; where the interviewer may or may not have been prepared, may or may not have gone through all proper ethical and legal activities that would be certainly suggested. I think the Wingspread Conference and the evaluation guidelines that resulted from that was a milestone in this direction.

If the proposal that we were working on to implement the study of the teaching of oral history, if we had been able to get that submitted and if it had been funded--of course, it came just at the wrong time financially--the result of that would have in addition established some sort of Wingspread type conference for people involved in funding oral history. In other words, we feel a real need for informing the funding agencies and people so that they can be aware of what professional oral history is, versus the radio announcer who had incidentally interviewed interesting people who came to town and now wants money to transcribe these things because it's oral history, this kind of thing. I think that was certainly a change for the better....

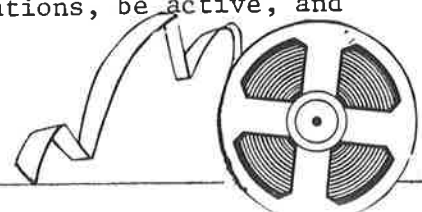
I think the attention to maximizing sound quality is an important change. Bill Moss sent a paper to Durango on the enhancement of sound quality. He pointed out that people would come to the Kennedy Library wanting to use the actual voices for voice-over for documentaries, and found out that the tape quality was so poor that they had to take the transcripts and hire actors to recreate the voices. I think that's a step in the right direction.

There are several things that disappoint me a little bit. One is that there has not been a more consistent expansion of what I consider to be good, responsible teaching of oral history. A lot of the courses spring up for a few years and then they disappear. In some instances, I realize, it probably arises from the fact that the professor is doing some research, he dis-

covers oral history, he thinks, "Aha, I'll teach a class!" He teaches the class, but his research moves on to something else, he's no longer interested, he drops the class. This is my assumption in several cases. But it's disappointing that in more places around the country one cannot have a university level course in oral history, which I think is entirely different--and this is a point we all made on the council to writing these proposals--entirely different from a weekend workshop, a one week workshop, a two week workshop, a month workshop. A fifteen week university level undergraduate or graduate course is going to be entirely different from somebody coming in and doing a workshop and not monitoring what they are doing over a long period of time. That's a disappointment to me....

Q: What would you recommend to someone who is starting out right now in oral history? What would be your words of advice, say to someone else who might be in a class like you were in 1969?

A: Well, in the first place, there are many more resources available now than there were then, but at the same time, some of them are a little confusing. While there are many more very good sources of information on oral history there are some sources of information that are a little shaky. Naturally, since I teach a class, I would highly recommend enrolling in a class. If one does not have a class available, one should enroll in a workshop, should seek out expert advice, should certainly join the oral history associations, become familiar with the literature, both past and current, find the publications, such as the American Archivist and the American Association for State and Local History that regularly publish information about oral history. So that not only will you get off to a good start but you will be regularly plugged into a network that will keep you current as developments come forth. And of course, in an activity that is closely aligned to technology as oral history is, with tape recording and now videotaping, it's important to keep up with the latest developments in order to maximize the investment that you make. So I would say: get good grounding, good instruction, plug into the literature, join the organizations, be active, and enjoy it.



Q: And Mary Jo took your class at George Washington?

A: When I left George Washington to come to Maryland, I left the class with Mary Jo. She taught that workshop for several semesters and then got a position in the library. I like to think of Mary Jo as kind of the first of the next generation.

Q: You also used to sponsor those wonderful luncheons. How did those develop?

A: Well, those developed out of my sense of Southern hospitality, I suppose, and my horror at not being able to pay all these lovely people for coming and speaking to my class. Of course, there was very little money for my salary at GW, and there was no possibility for rewarding those people who were kind enough to come and speak to the class. So I got the idea of having a nice luncheon at the University Club at the end of the semester. I wheedled the Oral History Association mailing list out of, I think it was Jim Mink at the time. And I just sent out blanket invitations for people to come. Everyone would pay, except my guest speakers. And my goodness, we just had a marvellous turnout. This was the first opportunity, except for the Airlie House Colloquium, for the Washington oral history community to get together....Of course, when I moved to Maryland it was discontinued because the food at Maryland was so bad!

Q: Didn't OHMAR spring from one of your lunches?

A: No, actually that was from the first one that Mary Jo had. I left GW in the fall of '72 and this was about '76, I think. Mary Jo had been teaching and we were constantly talking about getting a group together. Finally in March of '76 she had a spring workshop at GW and with the notice went an invitation to those who were interested in talking about a regional oral history group to stay after lunch to talk about it. There were 30 or 40 of us who stayed after that day. Then we decided to meet for the first time, subsequently, a month or so later at Towson. And we were off and running. I may be the grandmother, but Mary Jo is the mother of OHMAR!

Q: Over your career as an oral historian you have interviewed a very wide range of people. I know you have done federal

officials, you've done college professors, you've done canal boat operators. Do you have any particular preferences about types of people to interview, or do you just take each assignment as it comes along?

A: Whether they are a trash collector, or a foot soldier, or a member of the president's cabinet, a housewife, a schoolteacher, there's not a person alive who does not have interesting and unique experiences from which the rest of us can really learn. If I named any of my favorite names you would put them in, and I would be embarrassed. I have some favorite people, simply who were just such nice people. One lady who was on the canal sent me home with a bucket of homemade soap....One of the presidential appointees that I interviewed, who has since risen in the world, was a great person. Every now and then I see articles and interviews with him in the press, and I think, "I know some things about him that you don't know!" I must say, I have never interviewed anybody that I didn't like or feel comfortable with. There were a few people who were nervous, for one reason or another, at the beginning. I don't think they were nervous at the end.

People have said, "Don't you have a problem getting these busy people to talk?" I've said, "Well, sometimes you do have a problem getting them to make an appointment." Bill Usery /of the Department of Labor/ was very difficult because he was involved in a lot of labor negotiations at the time and was a very busy person. Besides, he wasn't the type of personality who would want to sit down and analyze what he was doing or had done; and wasn't really vain enough to indulge in self-aggrandizement, which always helps to get somebody to sit down and talk to you. But I said, "Once you get the appointment and once you get in, then the problem is to get the people to shut up--to stop talking and let you conclude the interview"....

Q: You've been involved with oral history for over twelve years now. Obviously the field has grown tremendously, but has it changed in any way?

A: Yes, it's changed in many ways, but as you ask the question I'm trying to think are the ways in which it's changed important ways or not.

Q: Are they for better or for worse?



OHMAR

ORAL HISTORY in the MID-ATLANTIC REGION

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FALL MEETING: USING ORAL HISTORY IN COMMUNITY HISTORY

OHMAR will hold its fall meeting on Saturday, November 6, 1982, at the Arlington Historical Museum (formerly the Hume Museum) in Arlington, Virginia. Registration will begin at 9:30 a.m. and coffee will be available. The morning session, beginning at 10 a.m., will feature the presentation of this year's Forrest Pogue award to Martha Ross, and her acceptance speech on "Oral History: Teaching and Learning." The annual business meeting will also be held during the morning. A box lunch is available for \$4, reservations required.

At 1 p.m. the afternoon session will focus on "Using Oral History in Community History-- An Update." Sara Collins and Roy Rosenzweig have organized a program that is a variation from previous formats. Oral historians representing many diverse programs in community history have been invited to make brief presentations describing their projects and particular procedures, problems, methods, uses, and results. After these presentations, those attending will have the opportunity to visit the exhibit area to discuss the projects with the presenters, to view video productions, and to examine publications resulting from the programs. Those making presentations include:

Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, Northern Virginia Community College: "Retrieving the History of Household Workers in Washington, D.C.; Process and Problems."

Pamela Cressey, archaeologist, Alexandria, Virginia: "Oral History in Urban Archaeology."

Roxanna Dean and Marcia Greenlee, Martin Luther King Library: "Development of an Oral History Research Center in the Washingtonian Division of the Martin Luther King Memorial Library, Washington, D.C."

Betty Key, Maryland Historical Society Oral History Office: "Community Projects in Maryland and the Maryland Historical Society's Involvement."

Sandra Kurtinitis, George Washington University: "Interviews and Slide Show on Takoma Park, Maryland."

Marian Mohr, Fairfax County Public Schools: "High School Students and Community History."

Diane Malone, stage director in Arlington Performing Arts: "Arlington Anthology, Dramatization of Oral History."

Carl Oblinger, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission: "Convergence of Oral History and Folklife in Pennsylvania."

Following the program, a dinner will be held to honor Martha Ross at the Yenching Palace on North Washington Street in Alexandria. The cost is \$11.50 per person. Please fill out the form on the attached flier for your lunch and dinner reservations; no advance payment is required.

Directions to the Arlington Historical Museum are listed with a map on the back page of the newsletter.