

Volume XX Number 3

Winter 1999

A Publication of Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region, affiliated with Oral History Association

1999 Pogue Award Winner



Elly Shodell

Elly Shodell Interviewed by Sara Collins

On October 15, 1999, Eleanor (Elly) Shodell was given the Forrest C. Pogue Award for the body of her work in oral history. The 21st recipient of the Award, she is a librarian at the Port Washington, Long Island, NY, Public Library. A history major who combined library studies with her history passion, she was interviewed on October 16th by Sara Collins, Arlington County

public librarian who was the 1997 Pogue Award winner. Excerpts from that interview follow:

Collins: Could you tell us a little bit about how you use the oral histories and combine (them) with exhibits?

Shodell: That's a good question, and it's more of an art than a science, I'm afraid. So it's nothing that probably can be replicated. But we do the full transcripts because it's our responsibility to archivists and researchers and students to have the exact verbatim written word of what we have heard. And we index it and catalog it and deposit it. And we always feel that that is our prime mission. But we weren't getting that much use out of our transcripts, even though we are a public library with a pretty good local history collection. For some reason, there's a big lag between creating the oral histories and people using them. Even Columbia has experienced this. They say there's a 10 year lag. So, I wasn't patient enough, you know, to wait 10 years for people to use the collection. One of the ways we thought, aside from doing audio montages, which we do as well, so people can hear immediately what is being

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our future projects. The sand mining project did not come out of the African American one. That was really a response to a New York Council for the Humanities initiative which fascinated me. It was about the relationship between community and history and geology,...because now everybody's talking about space and place and landscape. You know, this was 1983, and that was their initiative. Sand mining seemed to be a very, very logical project to fit that grant and it enabled us to get funding.

Collins: This is amazing, as I read your list of massive achievements, I think it's very spectacular that you've worked and been able to obtain these grants. How do you go about that?

Shodell: Well, I think the key is to become friends with the program officers and make them familiar with your institution.

Collins: And with your work.

Shodell: And with your work. Enthusiasm and professionalism generally seep in to the conversation and are noticed. And there actually are more grants than there are projects on Long Island. Long Island seems to not have developed its historical resources as fully as it could considering the number of people on Long Island and the amount of square footage. I found that granting agencies were often looking to give money to Long Island, and particularly the neglected populations, because we do have all of our moguls and our good documentation of the Guggenheims and the Goulds and the Fricks and their museums and their name, but the less recognized parts of the population are exactly where foundations often want to put their resources. So we've been lucky.

Collins: When you used your grants, did that also provide you the resources, manpower and technical advice?

Shodell: Absolutely. I don't think we could have done what we did

without the excellent designers we had, the audio producer, Charles Potter, radio arts. We also could hire interviewers for the African American project. Aside from me interviewing, I also hired somebody from Schomburg Library. And for the aviation (project), I was able to get a graduate student at Stony Brook who knew a lot about aviation. So the grants absolutely helped put that final and finishing touch. And they, the grant officers, often know other consultants in the area. Their networks are so broad that it helps you go to other exhibits that are sort of related and it sort of inspires you to look beyond your immediate neighborhood. We travel all our exhibits so that we find people coming in and using our transcripts from far out on the Island because they have seen the exhibit and want to further research that topic. It's almost been a way of marketing our archival resources to have these exhibits traveling around. Some of them have been traveling for 15 years....

Collins: I'd love to know how you interest your directors and get the support of the director and the library system in these projects, because that often is not easy.

Shodell: Right. It is such a challenge. That's a great question. Our first director, Ed de Sciora, who had been director for 35 years until he left, was a very innovative man. And he never turned down anything bizarre and out of the ordinary. I mean, for one of our celebrations, he had trapeze artists hanging off bars in front of the library. He was very, very avant garde, nouveau, forward-seeking - and, luckily, he was the first one who I approached for the first oral history project after I left Columbia. He was very receptive because it was something new. He'd never heard of it, it sounded daring - little did he know. So he gave the go-ahead and he fortuitously had a trustee who was connected to the Arwood Foundation which was funding African American history projects, so it



Ann Hornaday of the *Baltimore Sun*, Elaine Eff, OHMAR President and Donita Moorhus, secretary, at Archives II.

Space Shuttle and we had that end of things. So, you know, I'm all over the ball field. Plus, there's an air and space museum, why do they need me? So I, I read a couple of wonderfully interpretive books, particularly *The Winged Gospel* by Joseph J. Corn who's at Stanford, and he had a fabulous approach which was about how this gospel of aviation, which was so strong in the '20s,



Carmen Lee and Don Ritchie, US Senate
Historical Office

gradually became a great disappointment to the American people. Because there was not an airplane in every garage. It did not bring peace and democracy to the world -- All the hopes that people had for aviation, early, fizzled out by the time the wars came, and particularly by the time of the Cold War, the plane was seen as this sort of harsh, destructive reality, or a vehicle that would just take you from one place to another, maybe carrying disease with it. The entire perception of aviation from the early years to the later years had deteriorated. So, I read this book and it was eye-opening, because I was trying to think, how can I apply this to Port Washington? And I realized that, again, there was a hope of aviation there in the 1920s and '30s when they were developing the flying boats, when they were trying to foster a new kind of transportation, a new kind of hope for man to reach out over the whole world, and all that was left now was an empty, destroyed aviation base on Manhasset Isle that

nobody in Port Washington visited.

Collins: A military base?

Shodell: It was a commercial base. First it was built by Mussolini for the Italian Marchetti planes. Then it was a TransAmerican Airline that Rodman Wanamaker had. Then PanAm bought it for their first flying boats. So it had a tremendous history and it was right in Port Washington and nobody knew about it, because all it is right now is a level field. So that gave the absolute - why has the memory of aviation disappeared from Port Washington? I tried to tie it into the dashing of the hopes and the dreams of people and the harsh reality of the industrial military complex, and it played itself out in Port Washington by this disappearance of any memory of that era in our town.

Collins: So is that a microcosm of what's going on all over the country, or particular to Long Island?

Shodell: I'm not sure. I think because Long Island is so suburban and, Port Washington, in particular, tries to portray itself as this sort of commuter community of idealized lawns and greenery and water that nobody wanted to acknowledge that, yes, there had been airplanes there. There had been mechanics, there had been military activity. It just did not fit in with the perception of what Port Washington was. This is my theory. It can't be proven. And no memoirist will give me an answer. Because when I searched around - the project was getting memoirists to verbalize what I was trying to convey, and none of them ever did. So it became rather theoretical. But the CD ROM, at the end of every few screens I have this message like, Why did the memory of aviation disappear from Port Washington?



Why did nobody realize, you know, that Mussolini was building - and that there were Nazi insignia on some of the flying boats in the bay? And it's just one of those things that was forgotten. So we've tried to resurrect -

Collins: Yes, how important to try to uncover those memories.

Shodell: Yes.

Collins: I'm so glad you're doing that. So it'll

thrilling as it is. And having gone to Music and Art (high school), and I thought I had no art talent, I couldn't design. The whole visual aspect coming together with the audio aspect, there's a certain richness to it. And my assistant says that she never figures out how I ever get anything done because until the very last minute it's in a thousand shambled shards all over the room and a mess, and then, suddenly, this thing gets born and it's just wonderful when people come and see themselves in the panels, hear themselves in the montage. It's a very immediate experience. It's not like a major institution I work at, you know, it's sort of a small operation so it's a much more immediate response from people when they see these exhibits....

Collins: Are there other things that we haven't talked about that you have on your mind that you'd like to tell other oral historians or librarians in the field?

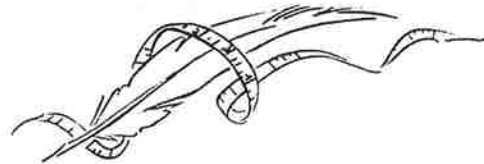
Shodell: I'm isolated in my job, in a way, because there are so few oral historians. But when you get to the OHA and everybody's had so much experience and is so supportive, you know, they're calming. If you think a crisis is happening, it's not really, because they've faced everything before. So I've just loved the years of going to those meetings. And then OHMAR, I originally asked Betty Mason which regional organization I should join. So she said, "Do the New England Association of Oral History (NEAOH), because you'll have a better chance of having an impact."

Collins: With John Fox.

Shodell: With John Fox. She thought OHMAR was just so top of the line that if you come in there, you know, as a little beginner, you will never find your way. But I have found that OHMAR, because it's so closely linked to the OHA, it's just the quality of the people who are on the board and who come to the meetings. It's inspiring and it sort of helps you get through the year. Because when you're alone on Long Island, you can think of what happened at OHMAR and OHA and realize you have a whole network.

Collins: I think that's so true, and the support that one gets through this organization is very helpful to us all. It's been a very great factor. And the fact that we are working isolated, this is our family, in a way.

Shodell: It's true. And the age range. I love that there are young students, there are veterans, there are librarians, there are businesspeople. The mix of people in that organization, it's not just straight historians, it's not straight anthropologists, there's a certain humanism that comes through. And even the deep divide between some of these, sort of, new theorists and old practitioners, it gets bridged because there's such a unifying goal which is really to preserve the words of people who are not otherwise documented.



For the complete interview, send an e-mail to dhaskell@state.de.us or phone 302/577-5044.

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Afternoon Session

"I Can Almost See the Lights of Home"

Up to now, the Internet has been used by oral historians simply for transcripts of the interviews they have conducted. Is this good enough?

Professor Charles Hardy doesn't think so. He has produced for the second issue of the on-line *Journal of Multimedia History*, Vol. 2, 1999 an aural history essay in sight and sound, which does extend horizons for oral historians quite a bit. You can find it at www.albany.edu/jmmh.

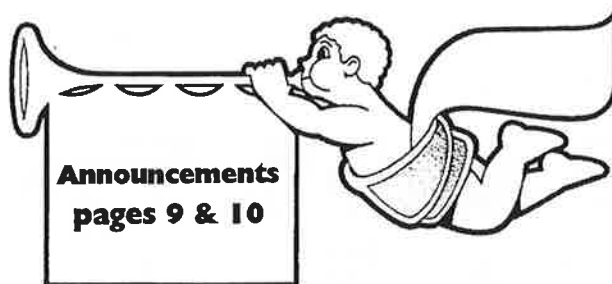


From left: Collison and Hardy, October 15, 1999.

Charles tells it like this: in 1996 he and Alessandro Portelli were teaching in the Oral History Program during the summer at Columbia University. Charlie asked Portelli if he'd like to collaborate on a project. His friend said yes, and proceeded to go off and do his part, spending three days in Harlan City, Kentucky, and collecting 14 hours of interviews. Charlie then put together, on his p.c. at home, two and one half hours of an oral history essay in sound, which is contained within Vol. 2, in the above named journal. Charlie says, "Sound can be a carrier of serious scholarship." The online publication includes the two and one half hour essay in sound, a print transcription of the essay, print essays by Hardy and Portelli, and photographs. To acquire the sound essay on CD or audio cassette you will need to contact Hardy at West Chester University, chardy@wcupa.edu. You will need to get a CD from Hardy to hear the journal entry as it should be heard.

It was truly impressive and provides another niche for the work of oral historians.

Dan Collison of National Public Radio served as the respondent to this program and enjoyed it very much. He invited oral historians with programs such as these to contact public radio. Dan said, "The web is a meeting place between documentary producers and scholars." Charles reminded the audience that the average written monograph sells about 400 copies. The challenge is to venture forward and hope for even greater "hits."



"From Today" Conference



Hosted by Brown University's Scholarly Technology Group: "From Today," will be a conference on electronically mediated documentary work, March 15-17, 2000, in

Providence, RI. Brown is actively

seeking participation from anyone interested in presenting or discussing his/her own electronically mediated documentary work. Review proposals are being accepted for theoretical panels or lectures, and film/video works for festival presentation. Practical seminars addressing techniques and strategies facilitated by electronic tools will be included.

For information: fromtoday@brown.edu or call David Reville or Sara Grady at 410-863-2934, fax 410-863-9313.



Howard County Historical Society Library

The Howard County Historical Society has been funded for "The Changing Heart: Howard County Personal Histories Survey," an oral history survey project. The funding agencies are the Maryland Historical Trust and Nordstrom's Department Store. This project could serve as a model for surveys of oral histories throughout the State of Maryland.

The project, according to director Lynne Humphries-Russ, is to survey county, state, community and private sources with oral history collections which have relevance to Howard County.

If you have information or would like to help, please contact Lynne at the Society office, 410-750-0370 or by e-mail at lynnehr@simplegiftspress.org.

Annual Treasurer's Report, November 1, 1998-October 31, 1999

Respectfully submitted, Phyllis Palmer, Treasurer

OHMAR

Expenses		Income	
Miscellaneous	\$659.64	Conferences (3)	\$5,586.50
(including Oct. 15 conference housing)		Membership	1,878.00
Printing.....	1,324.70	Publications	242.00
Postage	809.87	Contributions	36.00
Food/Receptions.....	2,803.26	Directories	20.00
Wages.....	300.00	Interest	54.44
Honoraria.....	700.00		
Travel.....	545.00	Total Income.....	\$7,816.39
(for Oct. 15 conference presenters)			
Total Expenses.....	\$7,142.32		

Account balance as of December, \$5,793.87

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