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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 creatihg 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

New Fees for OHMAR

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spoken in a fairly produced way, we thought that the exhibit format lent itself to the art galleries that we have at our library and there was already a public coming in, looking at our art exhibits and photo exhibits. So, it seemed to be a natural way to lure people to our oral history. And the way we use it, as Alan Berliner described, it's sort of a congregated thing where, it occurs to us what to do with it once we start seeing it, but we don't have a set pattern in mind when we look at our oral histories for an exhibit.

Collins: It's a creative process.

Shodell: Yeah. We let the oral histories speak to us, and we see the threads that are the most likely to attract the limited attention of an exhibit-viewing audience. They tend to be gearing the labels to 8th graders in exhibits.

Kelly Feltault,
Program Coordinator
Spring 2000

Collins: Isn't that interesting.

Shodell: You sort of have to bite the bullet and find those sound bites. It's against the whole principle, really, of the archive and the entire transcript and seeing everything in context, because you're really pulling things out and threading them together and truncating paragraphs so that they read better for the exhibit text. So, it becomes a bit of this creative process.

Collins: Have you ever used the actual voice in these exhibits?

Shodell: Yes, we always do.

Collins: You have the tape there?

Shodell: Yes...we cut the transcripts, cut and paste and edit, and try to find the threads and the most interesting bites. We also take the tapes and hire an audio producer to put together the most flowing and succinct - it's usually about a 5 or 6 minute montage - something that will express the theme of the exhibit, research, of locations. And he cleans up our tapes, often, because when we use volunteer interviewers, we don't always get the best sound quality. But he has been able to make it work. So we have these audio cassettes that we then put on a loop, a continuous loop, and people pick up handsets. We've never had the money to digitize our audio installations, but maybe someday will.

Collins: That will come.

Shodell: Yes, that will come. And it's so important for people to hear the voices at these exhibits.

Collins: Of course.

Shodell: At first, our exhibit designer did not want audio, because he felt people could not split their brains, looking at the photos and hearing the voices. He wanted just the visual. He never really worked with the oral histories. But when he saw the reaction of people, you know, you see them laughing and sort of teary, just from having these headsets on. And it did things to them that the photos couldn't do. It's that immediacy of the human voice....

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Collins: How did you hone in on the topics? Your projects have been topically organized and they're fascinating, the sand miners, the workers. How do you determine a project? Or does that evolve like the exhibits?

Shodell: It does evolve. The first one, we felt it was very important to document the African American community because it was so undocumented. (There) was such a dramatic lack in the record, that we knew that was one that we had to do. We started with that.

Collins: Small, wasn't it?

Shodell: Yeah, the whole community is about 300 people. So it was easy for us to manage. And also the elders were so old in the community. But, beyond that, we found that the germs of some of our future projects were actually from that project, because why didn't any of the blacks work on any of the great estates? That sort of led us, eventually, to be looking at the great estates. Why didn't any of the African Americans work in the aviation industry? Very often we came back to that core project to answer questions that led to

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.

was one of these things where all the stars converged....

Shodell: So Ed hired me as a consultant to see if this would work. It was a pilot project. You know, he wasn't that brave that he was actually going to put me on the staff.

Collins: Mm-hmm.

Shodell: So I worked as a consultant probably for two years, and then I figured out that I'd really like to be part of the civil service system, and perhaps work at the library all the time because I loved it there. It's a gorgeous building overlooking the bay, and wonderful working conditions, great staff. So I sort of felt him out about whether he'd be willing to establish an oral history project. If I could keep getting grants and got my MLS, (could he) just give me a separate office and make it an official part of the library?

Collins: How creative.

Shodell: I guess so. It did take some convincing. He had the board pretty well under control, so it wasn't a matter of any board members questioning this. It was pretty much if Ed wanted it, it happened, which was another lucky circumstance. That doesn't often happen. I was able to get grants those first, let's say, 5 to 10 years, without having to rewrite, without having to resubmit - it was easier then, it seems to me. So it seemed clear that it was okay for oral history to have a place at the library. The staff doesn't really get too involved with the oral history. They're very busy with their reference work and their information work. And they haven't been too overstretched since so few people had been using our collection in the beginning. It wasn't a threat to them to have to be accessing our materials all the time. So it sort of became a permanent part. And at this point, I'm a fixture. I'm now, I think I'm the 5th oldest librarian, I was the 5th youngest when I started....

Secretary, Donita Moorhus

Collins: Are you putting your interviews on the web?

Shodell: We're not putting our interviews on the web yet because there are some copyright issues and ethical issues that I'm having trouble coming to terms with. But we do have a CD ROM that we will make available.

Collins: I'd love to hear more about that. And I was curious to know just what traditions of aviation you are focusing on in that exhibit and the CD ROM?

Shodell: Okay! Again, these are good questions, because part of the challenge of the aviation project was that there really was no focus when I started it.

Collins: Oh really?

Shodell: There was so much aviation material. There's an aviation museum. There were aviation archives everywhere. Retired pilots, mechanics, engineers who had worked for Grumman, Republic, PanAm - and they all lived on Long Island. And basements, floor to ceiling with documents and photographs. And I truly thought that this will never happen, I can't deal with this, I don't see where I'm going and all it is is trivia. And the kind of information that they often give you, airplane enthusiasts, is so minute, you know, it's about what kind of oil they used on the six engine on the Fokker S9. And I thought I was drowning in - I couldn't handle it. Where am I going with this project? And where am I starting, because we had Curtiss here, we had Lindbergh here, we had all the early aviators, the flying boats, but we also had Grumman and we had the

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

be on a CD ROM, and as I understand it, there'll be voice, transcriptions, photos?

Shodell: Yes.

Collins: Film?

Shodell: We tried to get film. It was too expensive at the time. It was like $10,000 for two minutes. But we might - now that there are new Macromedia Director programs that compress images, we might put out something else on the web that just has the footage, because that's in the public domain. We have wonderful video footage. But we also have a good bibliography. We have opportunities for students to bookmark, take notes and annotate so they can work on their national history projects instructively. And actually, one of the best things is one of our memoirists went through every *Port News* from 1910 to the present and xeroxed every article related to aviation. Everything having to do with aviation, whether it was an aviation country club meeting in the 1920s, whether Mussolini had come to town, every coming and going with the PanAm clipper ships, because the Kennedys took off on that and Maureen O'Hara, all these celebrities. And we digitized those articles, so on the CD ROM is every article relating to aviation in Port Washington over those many years.

From left: Past President Judy Knudsen and past Treasurer Cindy Swanson preparing the Pogue Award Plaque early on October 15 at Archives II.

Collins: Now is that available at the library at Port Washington or other places?

Shodell: Well, as we speak, Disc Makers is running off 500 copies of the gold disk, so that will be available to schools and libraries. We might sell it for $19.99. Maybe it'll be year two thousand by the time it comes out. But we'll distribute it. If a place can't afford it, if there's a school district that can't afford it, we'll obviously give them the CD ROM.

Collins: What an inspiration that'll be.

Shodell: I hope so. I just hope that things don't crash and we don't get complaints. I'm sort of worried. It's a whole new era of pentium chips and specifications and downloading --

Collins: Things that you can't control.

Shodell: Yes. Yes. But I feel it is taking us, pretty much, into the future. And I hope that the web will eventually be a medium for us. Maybe it'll just be interview excerpts that we will put out there in order to inspire people to come and look at the material themselves....

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Collins: That's really something. Of all the things you've done, as researcher, teacher, historian, oral historian and librarian, documentary editor, and now working in this multimedia aspect, archivist, writer, and public programming, exhibits, lecturer, which is the most satisfying to you in all this? Or is it a combination?

Shodell: I think there are two parts that I love. One is the field work. I just love being able to get people to talk to me who have been unrecognized in the past and think that their lives are not important or interesting. So to get through at that level, it's a very minute level, but just sitting in somebody's living room - it's a friend for life. And I'm there for them if they have crises. I get so many calls from people who have problems and somehow feel that I can help them. It's almost a social work function that maybe is a repressed part of me, but that part is amazingly satisfying and unusual for our profession, I think, to be able to have that kind of personal interaction and get really to the heart of somebody's life. And the other part is the creative part, the working with the designer, and you're likening it to a symphony orchestra, but seeing all the parts fall into place at an exhibit is, you know, something that I never thought would be as

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....

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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?

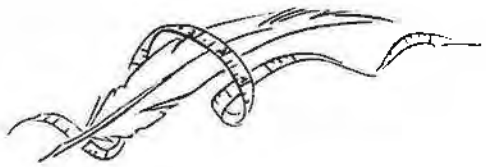
Shodell: I'm isolated in my job, in a way, because there are so few oral historians. But when you get to the OHA and everybody's had so much experience and is so supportive, you know, they're calming. If you think a crisis is happening, it's not really, because they've faced everything before. So I've 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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