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“Enthrallment with Local History”

The Forrest Pogue Award Interview with Sara Collins

Sara J. Collins, the 1997 winner of the Forrest C. Pogue Award, was one of the founding members of OHMAR, its first vice-president and president in 1977-78. She retired in 1996 after 22 years as Virginia Librarian of the Arlington Public Library, where she was active in the development of the oral history program. The interview below was conducted by Judith Knudsen, the newly elected president of OHMAR, who is director of the Community Archives at the Arlington Public Library.

Knudsen: Sara, please tell us about your background before oral history--where you grew up and your educational background.

Collins: I was born in Michigan and raised in Royal Oak, a Detroit suburb, in a family all interested in history. I was always fascinated by the stories my father remembered from his conversations with his grandfather about the family roots in Scotland, moving to New Brunswick and then to Ontario, where they pioneered along the Thames in Upper Canada, near where there stands a monument to Tecumseh's fall.

One of my minors at Albion College in Michigan was history, but I really became enthused about local history when I studied at the library school at Catholic University. My thesis was an imprint survey and history of publishing in Michigan before the Civil War, which I researched mainly at the Library of Congress, at the Burton Historical Collection at Detroit Public Library, and at the libraries at the University of Michigan. Trying to solve the mysteries of a particular time and place and using the historical materials in collections certainly got me hooked on the values of preserving the materials of local history. I think a research project such as this was most valuable later in guiding others doing historical research.

The next step toward this enthrallment with local history came when I started working at the library and found materials about our community to answer reference questions. And I immersed myself in reading these. Arlington's history indeed was most fascinating, and probably because it was hidden: so much of the physical evidence of its past was obliterated by the late sixties, when I became conscious through the written history. Of course, I was so pleased later to be appointed to work with the local materials.

Knudsen: When did you first become aware of oral history?

Collins: When I became Virginia Librarian at the Arlington County Public Library (Arlington, Virginia), in 1975, I became aware of the limits of information in the collection about our county. There were a few texts and a pictorial history of Arlington, some clippings from newspapers, and some excellent researched articles in the local historical magazine, but not much information on the neighborhoods, people, and events that shaped Arlington County or which composed its day-to-day life, particularly its African-American residents. The county was gearing up for Bicentennial celebrations, and library patrons, including county staff, were trying to document information on our history and researching information on the oldest families in what had become Arlington County. Then one glorious day I came across some documents in a file: interviews with residents of a senior center in one of our older black communities. These were people with very long ties to Arlington. There were also group interviews with an earlier librarian and a county notable. This was a project initiated by my predecessor, Kathleen Smith, and Marilyn Gell, in collaboration with the Arlington Historical Society.

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Knudsen: How did this inspire you to become involved in the process of oral history?

Collins: My excitement must have been infectious within the library. At that time in the mid-seventies, the county was revving up for the celebrations for the Bicentennial, and the county offered incentives to organizations who wished to support commemorative activities. Caroline Arden was the library's public relations official, and when members of the Arlington Zonta approached the library to see how they could apply their resources toward a project that would make a lasting contribution to their public library, they were told about and examined several options. The oral history appealed to this service group of professional women, and they offered to support the library in its efforts to begin an oral history project.

Knudsen: Tell us how the project got started.

Collins: Several meetings with Zonta members indicated their level of support: a workshop to train volunteers, financial help for obtaining equipment and the transcribing. Since I was very unfamiliar with oral history, I began seeking information. There was so little in print then, and the term did not even appear in library catalogs or in periodical indices. So when a librarian needs information, he or she goes to the high tech medium—then the telephone. I believe it was then I contacted Dr. Pogue, as I saw his name mentioned in my predecessor's files as a source who had helped with guidance to the earlier project.

Eventually, all roads lead to Martha Ross, whom I found, and soon I was meeting with Martha at the Department of Labor, where she was working on an oral history project. We met in her office and discussed what was needed to get the project underway. This was the session where her youngest daughter, Marie, who had come to work with her mother, became bored with all this oral history talk and crawled under a desk to sleep.

As all oral historians in this area know, all good things start with Martha, and by the end of our meeting, I began to understand more what was involved in oral history, and how we could get started, and who might be able to help with this. It was to begin with an all-day workshop at the library, but with a kick-off program the evening before to explain what oral history was and what it could accomplish for the library. Meanwhile, the library began the process of publicizing the project and recruiting volunteers.

Knudsen: Tell me about the workshop.

Collins: At the evening program, there were three very inspirational speakers: a woman from the League of Women Voters oral history program in Montgomery County; Dr. Peter Olch, oral historian at the National Library of Medicine; and Dr. Forrest Pogue. I remember particularly that session because people were so fascinated with Dr. Pogue's experiences and continued to ask questions—the library was closing, the lights went out, and a group followed Forrest out to the parking lot of the library, where he didn't hesitate to continue the lecture and answer questions. (I was driving him home but had trouble getting him on the road.)

The next day was a full one. Alan Fusonie, from the Department of Agriculture Library, lectured very effectively on the need for preparatory research before interviewing; Betty Key talked about the steps needed to get the oral histories accomplished and into the library system; and Martha Ross taught us all about the interviewing process and directed some actual interviewing practice sessions among the attendees. What I remember most about this workshop was how cleverly both Betty and Martha let these potential oral history volunteers know that not all people are suited to interviewing itself and some who may not be good listeners and who would rather talk should consider some other aspect of the process. These volunteers knew where they would fit in best and offered to do research, help with processing, etc., rather than do the interviewing. We all finished the day excited and exhausted and ready to plan our next steps.

Knudsen: What happened next?

Collins: An advisory board was formed from the volunteers, and we met a number of times to outline priorities, list interviewees, processes, determine what equipment was needed (which Zonta provided), and plan the steps involved. At the workshop and subsequent meetings, a list began of people who should be interviewed, based on age and experiences. We were not focussed on a narrow subject but a rather broad-based one, of interviewees who had long residence and/or involvement in the county and their areas of knowledge where we knew we needed more documentation. Since we had so little at the time, the broadness of our goals worked. The smallness of our county made this possible and easier to match up the volunteers and their interests with what we at the library needed.

The equipment was acquired, interviews started, and early ones were transcribed by a professional secretaries' organization recruited by our

sponsors. This turned out to be more than they could do, as the voices of elders and also the specific place and personal names were unfamiliar to them, and Zonta offered to support an outside transcriber.

Knudsen: What were some of the other rewards of this project?

Collins: The project gave us very valuable information on several areas of the county and some long-time business people in Arlington. None of the people interviewed are alive today--and I shudder to think what we would have been missing had we not acquired these interviews. One of the interviews was with Perry West, who had been owner of West Brothers Brickyard in the county until the building of the Pentagon and whose family had been in business earlier in Washington, D.C. Mr. West talked about operations of the brickyard, how it continued through the flu epidemic, Depression, and World War II. He was in his mid-nineties when interviewed and lived quite a few years after that, testifying before Claude Pepper's committee in Congress when he was over 100. He frequently would remember something else to add to his interview and would have his chauffeur bring him over from Washington so he could impart some more of his memoirs. I'll never forget that when he was interviewed, the three generations of his family spanned the lives of all our presidents, as his grandparent was born shortly before George Washington died!

Another person interviewed grew up on the Henderson farm in Ballston (Senator Henderson of castle fame in D.C.) and remembered a community nearby of former slaves at Arlington House. The interviews were used for research and later were compiled by our county performing arts organization into a readers' word-stage performance. They had studied the voices and intonations and gave an interesting impression of Arlington in an earlier time. I do think the tapes are a reflection of changing accents of Arlingtonians over time.

One of our volunteers interviewed people in the Hall's Hill area, an old black community, and these are valuable for our knowledge of rural life in an era that was not so long after slavery.

Knudsen: What happened to this project?

Collins: We operated through the Bicentennial--maybe about two years, long enough to know the value of acquiring oral history interviews. But then there was a dark period when it became impossible for me to continue with this, as we had reductions in the library staff. The project was boxed up and put into storage

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for a day when it could be resumed. And during that time I left Arlington to head the Virginia Room in the Fairfax Library system, but then returned in a year.

Soon after this, a scholarly gentleman by the name of Ed Campbell, encouraged by the director, approached the library to volunteer his services. At the time he was reducing the time he spent in his Washington law firm. OHMAR members may remember having met Ed, as he came to several programs and workshops. He had been interviewed in the earlier project and suggested that he would like to be an interviewer. To make this resumption of the project easier on me, he offered to do some of the legwork from his law firm: contacts with interviewees, letters to interviewees, etc. So we were off and running again, much to my relief and some concern about the impact upon the workload.

Then, with the help of Ed and the Arlington Zonta club, we acquired a computer, and the library arranged for us to recruit and use transcribers. Ed and I consulted regularly on who should be interviewed. He made the arrangements, and most of the interviews were done in the library, in contrast to our earlier interviews, which were in the interviewee's home or office. I think this was better in the long run, as people began to associate the project with something wonderful their library was doing; it brought people closer to the library and the purposes of the local history collecting that we were doing. Often the persons being interviewed had photographs or other documents to donate to "their" library.

Knudsen: How did this proceed with the one interviewer?

Collins: It certainly simplified the administrative process. We had an excellent interviewer, who knew the county more thoroughly than anyone living; he had been involved in almost every phase of civic, political and legal life here. He was highly respected, very intelligent and had a remarkable memory, was very objective in his interviewing (he was often interviewing people who had been political opponents). His most gentlemanly and civic demeanor made him very approachable and nonthreatening to people he was interviewing. Ed was so very much interested in governmental and political life here and seemed surprised when I asked him to seek information about the mundane things (neighbors, schools, buildings, houses, etc.), but incorporated them into his inquiries.

The very depth of his knowledge and his experience as a trial lawyer added a clarifying dimension to the interviews he did. He always had the interviewee clarify exact locations, spell out names or places, such as one would do in court. Often people

brought a lot of family photos and documents to donate to the library, and as he queried the donor on each item he would label it on the artifact and in the interview as exhibit 1, exhibit 2, etc. We were very fortunate to have Ed work with us until his death two years ago.

As his vision deteriorated and it became impossible for him to read his interview notes and operate the recorder, our director recruited an excellent collaborator to work with him. Cas Cocklin, too, had been involved in much of Arlington's civic life and had interviewed people when she was editor of the Arlington Historical Society's Newsletter. Cas was interested as well in home and neighborhood life, so she provided this dimension. It took a while to work out the balance of dual interviewers, but soon we had an excellent interviewing team. The result is fantastic documentation. You can imagine what a blow it was when both died within months of each other.

Knudsen: I've noticed that not all interviews were done by these two. Who else was involved?

Collins: You are right. Often a graduate student would be researching an Arlington topic and could be persuaded to do an interview or a group of interviews for the assignment and share it with us using our deeds. Some other interviews were done by county planning staff who needed more information about a neighborhood. One of our biggest problems came about when a graduate student was doing interviews for us on a disappearing (redeveloping) neighborhood. She did the work of tracking down long-time residents, including those who had already moved to other communities, and also made the appointments for the interviews. It was not necessary when Ed and Cas were doing the interviews to send our "introductory" letter, and we bypassed this procedure with this student and learned what a mistake that was. The student had made an appointment to interview an elderly woman, and when her family and lawyer learned of this, they became alarmed, as she was involved in a lawsuit having to do with the sale of her land and the interview request raised suspicions about this being the "other side" seeking information.

Needless to say, we returned in such cases to our regular procedures of sending the advance letter. And you did some interviews yourself when they related to the history of the library branch where you were located. It has been fortunate that we have been able to take advantage of such opportunities when they arose.

Knudsen: What changes have you noticed over the years about the interviews in which you were involved?

Collins: may have mentioned that the earlier interviews were carried out in the subject's territory. That was right for that time, as most people were not accustomed to being recorded. In fact, many (and especially women) had to be convinced that the tape recorder was not dangerous and what they had to say was important to us. For most of our interviews earlier, the subjects were more at ease in the comfort and familiarity of their own homes. Of course, this led to some weird sounds on the tapes, of phones ringing, doors slamming, or traffic passing by the house. The controlled environment of the library (and better equipment) does generally make for a better sound recording, and almost everyone is comfortable now with the tape recorder. In addition, the use of these interviews has through the years pointed out the need to follow up and specify information. Our transcribers were particularly aware of lapses when questions weren't asked or followed up, so their notes were helpful when we sent the draft of the interview to the interviewee and we could encourage clarification in the cover letter.

Knudsen: What are some of the uses that have been made of the interviews?

Collins: That could take a book to answer! Primarily for research purposes on a person, neighborhood, or county event. Perhaps the most intensive use has been by authors, students, and program planners researching the very traumatic period when Arlington defied the state's policy of massive resistance and insisted upon keeping its schools open. The interviews have been particularly useful to county officials: they answered such questions as how Arlington arranged to get its water supply from the Corps of Engineers (an interview told us it was an act of Congress) or the reasoning behind much legislation or policy—particularly useful when Arlington was submitting a plan to Department of Justice to specify how recent school board elections would be carried out. When Arlington earlier was the only county in Virginia with an elected school board, the procedures and reasoning behind it was answered in interviews. This provision of legislative rationale has been an eye-opener to me: my intuition earlier was that all these governmental procedures would be documented in other sources and that we should put our resources on other topics. The reality is that county and state government do not have a Congressional Register-type of account, and except for what has been written or recorded by those responsible for legislation or department policy decision, we lack that specific detail.

A few years ago a local delegate to our General Assembly drove up from Richmond on a

snowy winter evening to research the speech she was to deliver a few weeks later to the annual Civic Federation banquet. It was a marvelous presentation, and Del. Karen Damer told the attendees how she searched through our computerized data base of transcripts and how it brought tears to her eyes to see we had a history of this vital organization in the words of those who had made that history, voices who were no longer around to be asked about their involvement.

We have seen obituaries recently that include the information that the deceased had been interviewed in the library's oral history program. We have had local senior or civic groups visit the library, and they are thrilled when the library can retrieve a tape of a beloved member or resident to find that they live on in their local library. What can be more important than for a library to be the collector and keeper of its constituency in their own voices?

Knudsen: Tell us how you became involved in oral history organizations--OHMAR and OHA?

Collins: During that defining meeting with Martha Ross, and my short course in oral history, Martha had urged me to attend Oral History Association annual meetings. I was unable to attend the most immediate session (Jackson Hole). Zonta helped make it possible for me to attend the following year the session held at Asheville, North Carolina. I walked into the marvelous hotel there and was greeted by Dr. Pogue, found the Rosses there in the lobby (with Marie with them)--and I felt right at home. Found myself sitting at dinner that night next to Bill Moss, whose book I had just read, and savored the opportunity to query him on some of the things I had just read there. Alan Fusonie was at that meeting, and there were others whose names I recognized and felt that I knew. It was a wonderful chance to talk to the people involved with the Friends of the Library project at the public library in Greenwich (Conn.) Public Library and learn from them, and their project has always been an inspiration to me. Martha was absolutely right about the value of going to OHA meetings, as it was for this fledgling a marvelous and encouraging learning experience--to say nothing of the fun.

The great thing about oral historians is that they come from so many disciplines: history, anthropology, folklore, library, archives, teaching, etc. And oral historians know how to listen and are most generous in sharing their learning. I've decided that what makes oral historians very special is that they are "people" oriented, or they wouldn't be doing oral history.

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The contacts I had made in that and subsequent OHA meetings were so helpful: whenever I ran into difficulties or had questions about the procedures, there were so many I could and did call upon for help. I was soon on the nominating committee in OHA and served later on another committee regarding regional organizations.

It may not have been long afterwards when Mary Jo Deering convened a luncheon meeting at George Washington University to explore the possibilities of forming a local organization, and soon some of us were meeting at Ben Frank's office at the Navy Yard to form what became OHMAR. That is where I had dozed a bit after lunch (probably had wine) and heard my name mentioned--seems I had become vice-president of OHMAR. (Did I mention how sly oral historians are?) Soon, with a workshop up in Baltimore, we were to begin to provide on a regional basis the learning and networking experiences that the national group provided.

Knudsen: You have always been an advocate of libraries being involved in oral history. Tell us why you feel that way.

Collins: There are so many people who say or cite an interview they have done with so-and-so, and yet it is not something the reader is able to verify. To me it is not an oral history unless it is on deposit to read or to listen to in an accessible collection. For collections of community history, oral history is an opportunity to acquire and preserve the memoirs (and folklife) of that community. I like the idea of librarians being actively involved in the process, as they are by training collection builders with the professional attitude of selecting and obtaining balance in developing collections. That applies to local oral history projects in that there need to be represented many points of view. Each interview builds upon those which have been done before and provides the research for subsequent interviews, the opportunity to query about what was said in other interviews. Also, the interviews need to be in a central repository where they are used under the guidance of professional staff who are able to point out other sources to supplement this documentation and to explain to the novice researcher that the interviews need to be used in context with other archival and published sources.

The benefits to the institution initiating and archiving these oral histories is beyond what administrators sometimes realize. A library that has the interest in obtaining oral history interviews, whether it be a public, university, or specialized library, becomes the precious, beloved, and respected repository of many local citizens' history, and they have become a

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participant in that library's process of collecting that history. For the Arlington Public Library, with its fine archives collection, the oral histories are a most useful corollary to those personal or organization records. I have seen, as our collection matures, how another generation is discovering a family member's "voice" in their own public library, and it is a tearful and rewarding find.


You haven't asked it yet, but I do want to say a word about oral history as a project. It isn't something that one person does: I am not the creator and doer of Arlington's oral history collection. As I have mentioned, we have had the continuing support and interest of a special organization, the Arlington Zonta club throughout all these years. Without our volunteer interviewers, who are willing to obtain the training and come to OHMAR meetings, there would be no oral history collection. Our Friends of the Library have also provided equipment and transcribing support. Think of all the people who have been interviewed: all of them cocreators with our many interviewers. If these creators hadn't given so freely of their time and memories, we wouldn't have this beautiful resource. We all know how important transcribers and other processors are to a project. And an oral history project cannot be started and maintained without the understanding and support of the institution's administration (library and government in our case). And the scholars, citizens, students who use and cite these interviews are an important part of the process. In my case I could not have initiated and kept an oral history project going without the support, encouragement and advice of fellow practitioners in the oral history field.



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Names and News

Women Ambassadors Project

The Women Ambassadors Project is currently preparing the transcribed oral histories of women ambassadors for deposit in appropriate libraries. To date, seventeen have been completed and deposited with the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College has requested a complete set for its archives.

ADST has requested that the project, which originally comprised interviews with women who served between 1933 and 1983, be continued. To that end, they have appointed **Ann Miller Morin** a fellow of ADST, in charge of overseeing interviews with current female ambassadors as they complete their assignments.

Because of the greatly increased number of women in high positions at the State Department, she is recruiting volunteers to interview these high-achieving women. If any member of OHMAR is interested in becoming part of this project, she should contact Ms. Morin at Women Ambassadors Project, 15008 Eardley Court, Silver Spring, MD 20906. Telephone (301) 598-1142. Fax (301) 438-7181. E-mail: Ann.Morin@AOL.com