

## Oral History as Part of a Corporate Archives Program

By Claudette John, CIGNA Corporation

**Editor's Note:** Collected here are five "Dialogue" articles written by Claudette John from 1987 to 1989. These articles cover Oral history as part of a corporate archive program.

### Part I: Importance

This year both of the "Dialogue" columns will be devoted to the subject of oral history as part of a corporate archives program. In this issue I shall discuss briefly my reasons for changing from skeptic to advocate for corporate oral history and the need for a formal written agreement between the collecting institution and the program participants.

What is oral history, and why should a business be interested in supporting an oral history program? The Oral History Association, in its evaluation guidelines, recognizes oral history as "a method of gathering and preserving historical information in spoken form." I find Jim Fogerty's definition more appropriate for a corporate program; he writes, "While the data that becomes oral history is present in the minds of potential narrators, it does not exist in any organized, collectible form. It must, rather, be created – and not alone, but through the interaction of an interviewer with the narrator."

Considering the recognized and frequently discussed expense of an oral history program, the "why" is a bit more complicated. Institutional archivists must be concerned with developing a collection that reflects as accurately as possible the life of

the corporate entity. And how does one do that in the twentieth century without employing twentieth-century tools? How many business people keep diaries or journals today? The answer, for all practical purposes is "none." An appointment book is about as close as you can hope to get. Even memos to file summarizing telephone calls, telexes and private meetings are becoming scarce. And records of conversations that took place on the golf course and in the company jet, or decisions made "after dinner, smoking a good cigar," are totally lacking. (Quote is from a 1983 interview with a corporate executive.) Charles Morrissey notes in his introduction to the recent interdisciplinary anthology, *Oral History*, that "Surprisingly, one of the most neglected areas (of oral history) is among the most crucial: the role of business enterprise in modern America. Businessmen have been tardy in telling the story of American business to oral historians; the story of entrepreneurship and the skills it requires has rarely been voiced on tape."

If, for the sake of argument, we agree that oral history is a necessary tool for documenting the twentieth-century corporation, the reasons for making the program part of the Archives' responsibility are apparent. Research materials are readily available in the Archives. Program needs can be assessed with relative ease; the archivist is probably all too aware of which parts of the record are incomplete. If the archives staff plans and directs the program from the outset, it is far more likely that the interviews will be broadly based, a true primary resource

usable to answer a variety of questions and serve a variety of needs, some of them quite unforeseeable when the interviews are taking place. Locating the program with the Archives also guarantees that the interviews will be properly catalogued, preserved and made available to researchers by professionals who are aware of the associated legal and ethical constraints, which are as important to program participants as they are to the company.

At CIGNA we have used oral history interviews to acquire information that is not available in any of the more traditional forms, to document decisions and the perspectives of decision-makers, to fill gaps in administrative history and to point the way through processing mazes. Significantly, if you want it to, an interview can also serve as a starting point for acquiring records, many of which will verify and augment the information discussed in the oral history session.

Let us continue by accepting as a given that the oral history program has been approved by management and funded in a more or less adequate fashion. Ideally, I would retain all program development, research, interviewing, transcribing, editing and processing as archives functions. Since that is rarely feasible, it is certainly possible to retain responsibility for all of these functions, reserving for staff those that staff can do best and contracting the remainder to an outside service. The archivist, or acting archivist, should always retain responsibility for program development and administrative control. It is possible to contract

any mix of the remaining program elements to outside services depending upon the circumstances of funding, corporate philosophy, legal arrangements and the abilities of staff. So far in CIGNA's program, staff has done the interviews, some of the transcription and all of the editing. That mix will probably change from time to time, depending on changing circumstances.

One of the knottiest problems that a responsible oral historian faces is the legal agreement. Where this particular issue is concerned, a corporate archivist has the distinct advantage of having access to lawyers on staff or on retainer. Please, recognize the necessity of confronting this issue in the program development stage. I found *Oral History and the Law* by John Neuenschwander to be extremely helpful. After reading John's pamphlet, I was prepared to seek and profit from professional advice pertinent to our own special situation.

While it is generally understood that no agreement is necessary when an employee is interviewed by another employee, I prefer to use a formal written agreement for all oral histories. Our agreement has been designed as much to protect the people who have shared their perspectives and opinions with us as it has to protect CIGNA. For example, it prevents the appropriation of one interviewee's material by others associated with the project. It guarantees, in legal terms, our ethical responsibility to honor an interviewee's request to close an oral history for a specified period.

We ask the interviewee to sign two copies of the agreement when the interview is over. If there is a series of interviews, one agreement is used for the entire memoir, and the agreement is

signed at the end of the final interview. One copy is given to the interviewee and the other is brought back to the Archives. The interviewer signs every agreement even though he usually is an employee.

Finally, a word about copyright, facts and theories in the public domain – information – cannot be copyrighted, only the particular expression of them created by the oral history interview. Since considerable resources and effort have been expended to create and preserve this record, the company reserves to itself the right to decide on its use. Notice of our claim to copyright is given to anyone with access to the materials by marking all transcripts and tapes: C (year), CIGNA Corporation, All rights reserved."

In the fall newsletter "Dialogue" will continue with part 2 of "Oral History as Part of a Corporate Archives Program." I plan to address topics such as: to transcribe or not to transcribe; is the tape or the transcript the primary record? interviewing; editing; preparing finding aids; and, is oral history really a primary resource? To the final question, I am going to answer a qualified "Yes." I hope that I may be able to incorporate questions and comments from YOU as well. Please address: Claudette John, CIGNA Corporation, Archives, Philadelphia, PA 19103, or the editor of this newsletter.

## Part II: Transcription

In the Spring issue of the Business Archives Newsletter "Dialogue" addressed the importance of oral history as a tool for documenting 20th century history. I discussed the advantages of making the program part of the Archive's responsibility, and the necessity of confronting legal concerns in the

planning stages. This column presents two questions, followed by my own admittedly subjective answers, for your consideration and discussion.

Is it necessary to transcribe all interviews? I know of one major oral history program-not corporate-which transcribes only a small percentage of its interviews. To date we have transcribed all oral histories, but we are still working on the priority interviews. When those are completed, we may very well reassess that policy. Since I consider the tape the primary document in oral history, transcription is really a matter of choice. My major concern is for preservation. Paper is definitely a more stable medium than audiotape, and since we use the oral histories mainly as sources of information and perspective on business, the transcripts are the more convenient form. I can think of numerous instances where you might not transcribe, linguistic studies, for example, or folklore. Are there legal issues or legitimate practical concerns that make it advisable to transcribe interviews? Is it advisable to transcribe what might be quoted in a publication? I would certainly evaluate those possibilities before changing our current procedure.

Should I edit the transcript? Yes, if you want the interviewee to review and approve it. And I believe that every interviewee should have an opportunity to review his transcript for accuracy. Transcribers do make mistakes. The tape may not be clear, or the transcriber may simply misunderstand what is said. There may be an obvious error in fact-an incorrect name, date or place. Innocent, straight-forward errors should be corrected in the transcript. Clarifications and additional information may be included as footnotes.

Acceptable spoken and written English differ greatly – sometimes, I think, to the point of being almost two different languages. It is often necessary to do some judicious editing so a person who is articulate on tape "sounds" that way in print. Of far greater importance is editing for clarity. The speaker's voice carries the listener through long, complicated, often convoluted sentences where inflection, emphasis and repetition flag the important elements of the narrative and make it easy to follow. Transcribe that verbatim, punctuate it liberally with "uhmms" and "ahhs," season it with occasional mid-stream changes in tense or number, and you have a maze that requires substantial effort for the reader to master. But on the tape it all sounds fine, informal and like normal conversation – because it is.

Having said that I edit transcripts when it is necessary to do so, I should go on to say that it must be done very carefully. You don't want to lose the unique characteristics of the interviewee's speech and personality. You can prune excess verbiage and rearrange phrases so that the order is suitable to written English, but do retain repetition or unusual syntax for emphasis, clarity and insight. If sentence fragments and punctuation present problems, as they do in some transcriptions, you may find an acceptable model in printed dialogue or good journal interviews. Literary elegance is not a legitimate reason to edit business oral history transcripts. Clarity is. Edit as much as necessary, but as little as possible. The tape, after all, is the primary record. And that remains unchanged.

In the spring newsletter "Dialogue" will continue with Part III. The topic will be interviewing-techniques, questions, etc.

### Part III: The Interview

It may seem odd to write about the oral history interview after having discussed transcription and editing in a previous column. However, decisions about how those elements will be handled are part of the planning stages of a project, and are normally made well before the interviewing begins.

Once the interview subjects have been selected, three things must be done prior to the first interview. First, an appointment must be made with the interviewee. I prefer to initiate the contact unless there is a letter of introduction or a referral. I write a short letter and follow that with a phone call. This procedure gives me an opportunity to answer questions, to tell the potential interviewee what he or she can expect, and to put the person at ease. Although many of the larger oral history programs schedule a pre-interview meeting, I find that neither the interviewer nor most of the interviewees have that much time.

Choose an interview site that offers the fewest possible distractions. Most of my interviews are done in one of the company locations in an office or a small conference room. When I use the conference room, I know that it will be quiet and that interruptions are unlikely. Unfortunately, I must sometimes conduct interviews in the employee's office, a practice which almost always produces interruptions. While it requires a bit more concentration, some of my best interviews have been done under those circumstances.

Two, careful preparatory research is essential. Most of the archivists I know do their own research or select material for a hired

interviewer to review. At this stage I am careful to note gaps in our documentation, so that I can ask specific questions. That knowledge also makes it possible for me to request that records be sent to the Archives if it appears that the interviewee may have access to what we need.

Occasionally, I write some interview questions, especially if I want to pose the same core questions to several interviewees. Usually, I simply organize brief notes which will prompt questions calculated to produce the kinds of information we want. Highly structured interviews, which require thorough research, may be more comfortable for some interviewees. Although I always go into an interview with some structure in mind, I don't interfere if the interviewee has his or her own organization or if the interview seems to flow naturally. Interviewers who choose to structure the interview must guard against rigidity, or a great deal of spontaneity and information may be lost.

On the other hand, I did a series of interviews in which the interviewee himself at first imposed a rigid structure. After we talked about how we might do future interviews, we continued to use his basically chronological approach but modified it somewhat. The interviews became easier for him, and, I think, far more informative. Certainly, they will be more interesting to researchers, and certainly his personality is more readily apparent. In this particular case, I judged that to be especially important, because his likeability and people-centered approach to business is a major factor in his success.

Finally, I recommend that you check your equipment before you leave the office and again just

before the interview. I always arrive for the appointment a little early so that I can test the microphones and tape one more time.

I find it helpful to review the project and its purpose briefly before starting the interview. This helps to put the interviewee at ease. Even people who are quite accustomed to public life and the media can be nervous about doing an oral history interview. I also say a few words about the equipment while I am asking the interviewee to clip on the mike.

I had planned to complete the "Dialogue" on oral history in this issue, but I have decided to continue it into next year. I want to give you examples of mistakes and missed opportunities, of victories and discoveries. And I want to make suggestions about how to get information without being combative.

Daniel Barringer, the archivist for the State Farm Insurance Companies in Bloomington, IL, wrote to me after the last "Dialogue" on oral history (December 1987). He told me that they have begun an oral history program there and included a brochure produced by the Oral History Office of the Sangamon State University which he has found very helpful. The brochure is available by writing the Oral History Office, Brookens 377, Sangamon State University, Springfield, IL 67108.

#### Part IV: Interviewing

In this, the fourth column on corporate oral history, I want to discuss interviewing techniques, to suggest how communication may be established between the

interviewer and the interviewee. Most of what I have to say is my opinion and is based on my own experience. It is drawn as much from what I consider to be my failures as it is from my successes.

Much has been written about interviewing styles, and I suspect far more has been said. Advice ranges all the way from "Confront the interviewee; follow up aggressively; be nasty, if necessary," to "Be an exceptionally good listener/recorder; don't interfere; don't attempt to guide the session." Needless to say, in a corporate setting, consistently going for the jugular could cost you your program. More important, is the fact that creating an atmosphere of antagonism will interfere with the easy flow of information and insight that is the essence of good oral history. On the other hand, while the opposite extreme might be useful in some circumstances, most business people are far more comfortable if the historian structures and guides the session. And the results usually will be more suitable for business uses as well as for research by scholars of business.

Should the interviewer be aggressive, or adopt a persona, or make outrageous statements to illicit particularly revealing responses? You will, of course, develop a style that is effective for you, appropriate for the program, and ethical. The only concrete answer I can give to that question is based on my own experience. Be honest with yourself and be honest with the interviewee. Your goal as an oral historian is not so much to get answers as to enable the interviewee to communicate fully with his or her future audience. You do that by allowing him to communicate with you in depth and on several levels. Establish a rapport with your

subject. Look at him. Even though you must watch the tape, monitor sound levels and, perhaps, check your notes from time to time, keep eye contact as much as possible.

There is, without doubt, much more to establishing rapport than eye contact. You must be genuinely interested in what the interviewee has to say. The depth of that interest is revealed as much by the quality of your preparatory research as by your manner during the interview. There is no substitute for sincerity. Understanding on a personal as well as an intellectual level is crucial. In fact, there are times when nothing less than empathy will suffice; maybe we should measure an oral historian's EQ--empathy quotient. My guess is that journalists, as a group, can use a far greater variety of interviewing techniques successfully than oral historians.

Does this mean that I have chosen not to ask the "tough" questions? No. I save them until later in the interview, or series, when the interviewee has become more comfortable with me and with the process. If I ask a tough question and don't get an answer, I may follow up by restating it. If that doesn't work or the answer seems not to be complete, I may broach the subject again from a different direction--and again, and again. Often I get additional information each time. I may drop the question until the next interview to let the interviewee think about it or come to terms with it. Some interviewees will come back to the question themselves, without prompting. Most of these "delayed" answers appear to be honest and fairly straightforward. If a response seems to be overly rationalized, just keep the interviewee talking around the subject; the truth--from his perspective--is likely to emerge. Certainly there are ways

to check the accuracy of a statement: archival records, other interviews, internal consistency, etc.

Sometimes humor will bring forth an answer:

Me: Why were you made senior vice president of the Group operations:

He: I had training in ...; I had experience in ..., and I suggested ... as a new product.

Me: Were there any other reasons?

He: No.

Me: Mr.

He laughed and admitted that, to some extent, that was true and proceeded to tell me the whole story.

This column is obviously a very subjective one. I hope it will inspire (or incite) some of you to share the benefits of your interviewing experience through "Dialogue." In the next issue of the Business Archives Newsletter, I would like to feature your comments on "Interviewing" and to discuss interview questions. I plan to use a couple of my own more successful questions and some from other oral historians who are doing business-related interviews. I especially want to include questions used by readers of this newsletter.

## Part V: Interview Questions

In the June issue of the Newsletter, -I promised that I would close the "Dialogue" on corporate oral history by featuring examples of successful interview questions. Obviously, many good questions are so specific to one interview or series of interviews that it would not be helpful to quote

them here. Others may not qualify as proper questions at all, emerging as they do directly from conversation. And, of course, some of the best questions are the brief follow-ups: "When?" "Who did that?" "Why?" "Where?"

Three archivists responded to my request for their "best" questions: Elizabeth Adkins of Kraft, James Fogerty of the Minnesota Historical Society and Harry Keiner of CIGNA, Hartford. Some of their questions are included below; the rest are selected from my old standbys.

"Will you tell me a little about yourself ÷ where you were born and raised, where you went to school, and how you got started at Kraft?" "Why did you choose to work for Kraft?" (Adkins) All four of us usually begin with similar questions.

"What are your views on the current relationship between government and industry?" "In what areas can government help industry?" "What can industry do to reduce friction with government?" (Fogerty) Harry Keiner tries, when appropriate, to have the people he interviews put the information they give him into an industry-wide context.

Elizabeth Adkins asks salesmen: "Do you remember your first sales call?" "What was it like?" "Will you describe to me a typical work day?" I use variants of these questions for interviewees who have spent some time in sales. Both Elizabeth and I use the latter question for anyone whose daily routine may be of interest to researchers. And I must admit that I have used it when I was too ignorant of certain aspects of someone's career to ask anything more specific.

Harry Keiner, recalling past

interviews for a history of Pratt and Whitney Aircraft, noted that project work for engineers is a team effort, so it was always important to ask who else was involved. He learned a great deal about how consultants were used by the company (something he had not been aware of) by asking that question.

I almost always ask, "What two or three people within the company were most instrumental in helping you in your career?" A variant for officers is "What two or three people were most instrumental in helping you build the kind of program (or company) you wanted to build?" Sometimes I ask: "Who was the most gifted or talented person you worked with?" "The most difficult?" "The most ruthless?" Or I may mention some of the interviewee's most influential contemporaries and ask him or her to talk about those people.

I have found that my "best of times, worst of times" duo elicits interesting and revealing responses: "What was your best year (or business experience) with the company?" "What was the worst?" Elizabeth Adkins asks, "Looking back on your years at Kraft, of what accomplishments are you the most proud?"

Jim Fogerty and I both interview top executives. He interviews as an outsider and talks to executives from many different companies. Among his favorites are "What are your views on foreign competition for American industry?" or variations on that theme: "Is foreign competition a problem for your firm?" "What can American industry – especially your part of it – do to compete with foreign firms more effectively?" Finally, he inquires about the interviewee's views on corporate philanthropy and uses appropriate follow-up questions to probe the reasons for approval or disapproval.

The executives I interview are from CIGNA and its two predecessor companies. I may pinpoint problem areas, for example, a major loss in one division, and ask how the problem was analyzed and resolved. I ask several people who are bound to have different perspectives, including the officer who solved the problem. When I interview a former chairman, president, or CEO, I always ask, "How were you chosen as president?" and "How did you choose your successor?" I ask about relationships with boards of directors or, in the case of a chairman, his relationship with management. I ask about corporate governance: "In the period when you were restructuring the Board, you must have had some discouraging moments as well as times when you wanted to shout, Hurrah! I've done it. Will you give me an example of each?"

All of us ask questions about products and marketing and management philosophy and about changes over the years. My final question, the one I use in some form at the end of every interview, is "If you were the historian interviewing (interviewee's name), what would you have asked that I did not?" Then I ask them to answer their own question.

Although I have promised to leave the topic of oral history, as always, I shall be happy to include your comments or, in this case, your favorite interview questions in the next issue.