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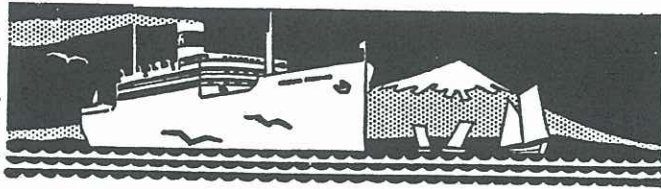
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International Dateline

Oral History Collections in New Zealand

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Allan Nevins (1966) responded to Dr. Johnson's remark: "In the grave we shall receive no letters," by saying. "It is equally true that from the grave no letters are sent out to the most anxious inquirers into old history or old mysteries." This seems to be extremely relevant in today's changing world. He also indicated very prudently that oral history was one of the ways of taking precautions against the loss forever of the responses to these inquiries of the future. The recording of oral history is important in any culture, but it seems to be even more important particularly in cultures which have had an oral tradition and one of these is the Maori culture in New Zealand. Therefore, oral history collections in New Zealand contain not only primary source material for researchers, but information relevant to any persons seeking a clearer understanding of New Zealand history and culture. The two main collections of oral history in New Zealand are the **Alexander Turnbull Library** in Wellington, and the **Radio New Zealand Sound Archives** located in Christchurch. There are also other collections in Universities and public libraries.

The Alexander Turnbull Library has the largest oral history collection in the country and comprises some 5,000 interviews in 9,000 hours of archival recordings. Subjects covered include most aspects of life in New Zealand spanning a wide range of topics from nursing to politics, and from pop musicians, teachers and homemakers to foreign policy-makers. It also includes a major

collection of Maori oral history recordings. Access to recordings held in the collection is free to researchers subject to any special conditions specified by the people interviewed or organizations which have deposited tapes. The Oral History Center in the Turnbull Library offers a number of services from recording oral history interviews for its own program of projects, carrying out commissioned oral history projects, collecting and archiving interviews recorded outside the library, to promoting regular training workshops and consultancy for oral historians throughout New Zealand and acting as an information base for anyone involved in oral history. The Librarian, Oral History Center can be contacted on email at <linda.evans@natlib.govt.nz>

The Radio New Zealand Sound Archive was set up in 1956 and the earliest recording held dates back to 1935 while the memories of the people recorded go as far back as the 1850s. The archive consists of a number of individual collections and include 14,000 lacquer discs, 11,000 open reel tapes, 12,000 hours analogue cassette, 400 hours Digital Audio tapes and 40,000 commercial gramophone records including LPs, 78s, 45s and cylinders. Three of the collections comprise recordings made during and after World War II by Mobil Recording Units that were then sent back to New Zealand for broadcast. These include recordings of New Zealanders' involvement in the North African campaign, and the Pacific and Japanese Campaigns. The Mobile Unit collection consists of recordings of New Zealand's first oral history project conducted in the 1940s. when the Unit traveled around the country recording everyday life of New Zealanders. These recordings include stories of gold rushes, accounts of European contact with the Maori and Maori contact with European, pioneer life and general accounts. Copies of audio from the collections can be obtained on payment of charges based on duration of the item plus copyright. Rates are available

on application. The Chief Archivist can be contacted on email at <soundnz.tpnet.co.nz>

Some universities have small oral history collections which have come about as a result of recordings made as requirements for specific courses of study. The oral history archive of the **Women's Studies Department at Victoria University of Wellington** was started in 1988 and consists of oral histories recorded by students as part of their coursework. At present, a large number of these are on audiotapes, but increasingly videotapes are used and in some cases both types are used to record a particular oral history. As the collection is growing steadily, initial discussions have been held between the University Library, the Women's Studies Department, and the Alexander Turnbull Library on incorporating this collection with the university library collection. Similarly, **University of Waikato** also has a small collection of oral histories recorded as part of a course of study on oral history itself.

There is no doubt that the advent of digital and video recordings have not only greatly improved the quality, but also enhanced the recordings with real life images. However, there are at least a couple of reasons for the increasing importance of oral histories in the digital and diverse world. Over thirty years ago,

"Even if lengthy and descriptive letters were exchanged electronically, would print copies or copies saved on disks be treasured and kept for future generations?"

Nevins (1966) noted that the numbers of great letter writers were reducing and that the spirit of the times was hostile to them. In an increasingly computer literate age, recording and sharing of personal

news and experiences via conventional letters tends to recede further. Electronic mail has enabled fast communication across continents, but the premium on time available restricts the nature and length of description contained in these letters. Even if lengthy and descriptive letters were exchanged electronically, would print copies or copies saved on disks be treasured and kept for future generations?

The past decade has also seen an increasing movement of people across the world for permanent settlement as well as long term study and more and more societies around the world are gaining multicultural dimensions. This means that often after a generation or two in a new country, the migrants' links with the country of origin tend to become blurred. Therefore, the stories and experiences of the previous generations are lost forever. Sometimes students of foreign backgrounds return to the countries of origin to search and record oral histories of their grandparents and elders. In new multicultural societies, these histories could be invaluable in understanding the culture of the different migrant populations. Therefore, oral histories recorded by migrants and overseas students have become increasingly important. At times, however, there will be difficulties with regard to barriers and inhibitions due to different cultural norms. In any case, collecting oral histories need careful planning as procedures have to be set in place to take care of such important issues as copyright and access. With the increasing diversity of societies, it has now become necessary to address these issues in a culturally sensitive manner so as to encourage prospective interviewees to participate in the project. 🐾

Endnote

Nevins, Alan. "Oral History and Why It was Born," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, v.40(7), March 1966, pp.600-601.