COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

COLUMBIA CENTER FOR ORAL HISTORY

Procedures: Audio Recorded Interviews

Background
Our usual procedure, once a project has been organized and funded, is to bring on staff an interviewer either as a consultant or as a part-time employee, to research and conduct the interviews. In recruiting interviewers we seek applicants who have knowledge of the field under investigation and interviewing experience. In particular, we search for someone familiar with the secondary literature, the location and organization of collections of written documents relevant to the interviews, a sense of the historiographical issues involved in the project, and the personality traits of an informed, interested listener.

Interview Process
Invitations to be interviewed are sent from our Center explaining in some detail the process of the interview. Once a person agrees to the interview, the interviewer arranges a mutually convenient schedule for the interview sessions. After preparatory research there is an initial session devoted to a discussion of the interview process or to review correspondence or other written documentation, although interviewing sometimes begins in the initial session. All interviewees are urged to consult their own records if they have time available to do so.

All interviews are digitally recorded, usually in sessions of one and a half to two hours each. Depending on the topic under discussion, the extent of the experiences of the person being interviewed, and his or her willingness to extend the conversation, interviews can run from one to twenty or more sessions.

Transcription
After the recording of each session the files are brought to our Center for transcription. Interviewers are expected to prepare notes containing proper spelling of names of every person or place mentioned on tape for the transcriber, as well as aids for the transcription of confusing dialogue or segments that are difficult to hear. This allows the interviewer to review the entire session and gain some sense of missed questions or unclear testimony that should be corrected in the next session.

Prior to transcription and the next interview session each file is reviewed by a Center staff member, usually the Director or the Assistant Director, and a session is held with the interviewer to discuss interviewing technique, missed opportunities to explore questions in detail, and any awkward or poorly phrased questions. We continue to monitor subsequent sessions to be sure the interview is being conducted in the most professional and responsible manner possible.

Interviewee Review
All interviews are transcribed verbatim, and are audit edited by a member of our staff to fill in any gaps and to correct transcription errors. The transcript is then sent to the person interviewed for his/her review and correction. At that time, we urge the

interviewees to add additional commentary where they think it is necessary. This review produces a more historically grounded document. While they are free to edit as they please, we encourage interviewees to limit the editing to correcting errors of fact and to try to maintain the spontaneity of the spoken word.

Legal Agreements
When we send the transcript to the interviewee to review, we also send a legal agreement for the interviewee's signature. This agreement allows him/her to open the interview immediately, to close all or portions of it for a specified and reasonable period of time, or to require scholars to gain written permission before consulting the transcript. We also ask at that time that the interviewee transfer copyright to the University, reserving to the interviewee the right to use, copy, or publish the interview until his/her death or an earlier specified date.

Throughout the process, it is our assumption that the person interviewed has all rights to the oral history until he/she formally assigns them elsewhere. Our goal is to make our interviews as widely available as soon as possible, but we must respect the right of the interviewees to close their interviews. It has been our experience that people will be much more candid when they are aware of their rights. While very few do actually close their interviews, the right to do so encourages people to agree to be interviewed.

Interview Processing for the Collection
Once the interviewees have finished their review and made whatever corrections they see fit, the transcript is returned to the Center where we prepare a final copy, incorporating any changes. A title page, preface, and an index to all people mentioned in the transcript are deposited with the collection here, and once copy is sent to the interviewee for his/her records. In cases of sponsored or cooperative projects, an additional copy is often provided to the sponsor or cooperating institution.

We also write an abstract of the contents of each transcript and prepare a separate catalogue entry for each person interviewed, as well as a catalogue entry for the project as a whole. All catalogue citations are entered into the University Libraries' CLIO cataloging system and are widely accessible to the public. This allows scholars throughout the world to find, almost immediately, information on our holdings and any restrictions on particular interviews.

Once the interview has been given to us and all restrictions have lapsed, it is made available to researchers here at Columbia and, through digital access on the web, to researchers throughout the world. To date, we have over 8,000 interviews in our collection and are increasing our digital web-based collections. Over 1,000 published books and hundreds of dissertations and articles cite our interviews. We serve over 2,500 patrons a year, and have no way of ascertaining how many others use our interviews at institutions holding microfiche interviews.