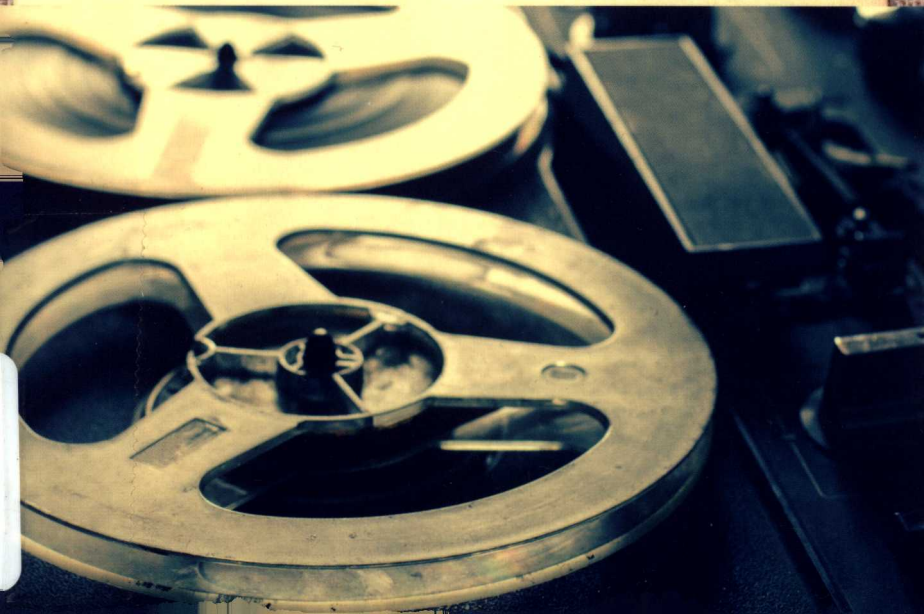


A. Arro Smith
Foreword by Loriene Roy

CAPTURING OUR STORIES

An Oral History
of Librarianship in Transition



CAPTURING OUR STORIES

An Oral History
of Librarianship in Transition

A. ARRO SMITH

Foreword by Loriene Roy

Arro

Neal-Schuman

An imprint of the American Library Association

CHICAGO | 2017

FE 19 '88

FE 17 '89

FE 10 '90

AP 25 '75

Preface

MY STORY

MY DEAR FRIEND, COLLEAGUE, AND ADVISOR LORIENE ROY BEGAN THIS collection of stories with her story in the foreword. Now I'll tell you some of my story.

My library career began in 1990 when I graduated from the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Texas at Austin. I was one of Dr. Roy's first students at the beginning of her career as a professor. She inspired me to become a public librarian, and I have worked at the San Marcos (Texas) Public Library my entire professional career. I am a cataloger.

Dr. Roy and I stayed in touch after I completed my MLIS, and I always enjoyed sitting with her at the alumni suppers held during the Texas Library Association Annual Conference. It was at one of these conference suppers that the dean of the Texas school, now known as the School of Information, implored the practicing librarians present to consider returning to school for a doctorate so that we could teach. He mentioned many of the prevailing statistics about the "graying" of the profession and the fact that many of his faculty were quickly becoming *emeriti*. Dr. Roy gently kicked me under the table and whispered, "You." I took up Dr. Roy's challenge, and she served as my committee chair for the dissertation on which this book is based.

This notion of the “graying of the profession” is well documented in the library literature, beginning in the late 1990s and continuing through the next decade.¹ A sea change in library personnel occurred at the beginning of the millennium because so many professionals had entered the library workforce in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

But back to my story. To tell you the truth, I was not even interested in oral history. I was going to do my dissertation using quantitative research methods to examine subject-heading and authority records (I am a cataloger, after all). But the University of Texas insists that all its doctoral students study both quantitative and qualitative research methods as part of their plenary curricula. To satisfy this requirement I happened to be taking a class in the Anthropology Department that introduced me to oral history methodology. And Dr. Roy happened to be ALA president-elect.

When you are ALA president-elect, you may organize some special projects for your tenure as ALA president. One of Dr. Roy’s Presidential Initiatives was to document the collective wisdom of this generation of librarians who were quickly retiring—and dying. I was not interested in this project, but when you are ALA president-elect, your Midwinter and Annual Conference schedules are packed with meetings and obligations. When you are ALA president-elect, you bring flunkies, friends, and people who owe you favors to Conference so that they can attend the meetings that you cannot. As Dr. Roy’s doctoral student, I was her flunky. And this flunky was sent to a meeting about a nascent oral history project to document the professional lives of retiring and retired librarians.

And, frankly, that meeting was awful. There were many great ideas about how to do this project, but no real leadership to make it happen. It also happened that my current dissertation topic was quickly going down in flames due to a change in personnel at the library school. As I was reporting on the meeting to Dr. Roy that afternoon, it occurred to me that I might be able to make this Presidential Initiative happen for her—and I might just be able to use this project to finish my PhD.

Later in this book, Dr. Billie Grace Herring will colorfully describe the time when the library school dean asked her to stay on and take an avail-

able scholarship for a doctorate: “You talk about a gift landing in your lap!”² That perfectly describes my own experience working with Lorie Roy on this project.

Dr. Roy gave me the opportunity to make her American Library Association Presidential Initiative a reality. “You talk about a gift landing in your lap!”

And along the way, I became a really good oral historian and cultural anthropologist. I came to fully embrace qualitative research methods, feminist theory, and the power of many voices to tell one story.

Capturing Our Stories: A National Oral History Program of Retired and Retiring Librarians is an American Library Association partnership with the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin. *Capturing Our Stories* gathers professional histories of experienced librarians as they exit their careers and makes those histories accessible to colleagues, students, and less-experienced librarians using state-of-the-art digital archiving tools through the Internet. The website for the *Capturing Our Stories* project is hosted by the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin. Please visit it at www.ischool.utexas.edu/~stories/ to listen to and watch the videos of most of the interviews. Transcripts, which are keyword searchable, scroll along synched with the interviews. Permanent copies of all the interviews are part of the American Library Association Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Both the recordings and the transcripts are available through Illinois’s online catalog at www.archives.library.illinois.edu.

I worked with Dr. Roy and the American Library Association to organize a cohort of volunteers to interview librarians at the end of their careers. We used oral history methodology, which calls for the interviewer to simply prompt the subject to tell her story in her own way. (It is clearly different from journalism. There were no set questions. It was not a survey.) I conducted twelve of the interviews myself. Thirty-five interviews were collected in total.

At first we simply used voice recorders, which is the standard oral history method. But when word spread through the library school of Dr. Roy’s project and my involvement, Quinn Stewart, the information technology

guru at the School of Information, called us into a meeting to demonstrate a powerful new tool to combine video interviews with searchable transcripts and stream the results on the Internet. This rich-media technology, GLIFOS, had been developed by a colleague at the University of Texas, and it was available for our use. So we began using camcorders to video record the interviews.

Successful doctoral research involves doing something that no one else has done previously. It must be unique research that expands our knowledge. My project, under Dr. Roy's supervision, was unique in two respects. I used state-of-the-art streaming technology to present an oral history project to a wide audience. When you read a quote from a librarian in the stories that follow, please know that you may go to the *Capturing Our Stories* website or to the ALA Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and listen to the audio recording for the individual's inflection—and in most of the interviews you may watch the librarian's expression—to see if you agree with my interpretation and transcription. It is all there. All my raw data is available for you—and future researchers—to study.

This preservation method (combining the recording with the searchable transcript and making it available on the Internet) was unique among oral histories at the time. The other unique aspect of my research that qualifies it as a successful doctoral study is the use of theory. Maurice Halbwachs posited that all our memories *are* our memories because we share them with at least one other living person. He believed memories *must* be collective to exist at all.³ Oral historians have eyed this theory for many years, and Alessandro Portelli has employed these ideas in his research about specific memories shared in Italy,⁴ but no one had interviewed a sizable sample of one population using oral history methodology to produce a collective memory of a profession using Halbwachs's theory. This is what I have done.

My successful dissertation is not an easy read. It includes an exhaustive literature review to document the ways my research is unique and to establish the relevancy of the research. It has a very long discussion

about the methodology and theories involved. And it includes an attempt at historicism (don't ask). This book intends to be just the good stuff. (My editor has insisted.) Part 2 of this book provides a primer of the theories and methodology I used, as well as tips on how to conduct your own oral history project.

This is the story of librarianship in the last half of the twentieth century told by thirty-five individuals. I have collected these oral history interviews and "listened" to hear a collective story of the profession emerge. Each individual story is unique, but together the stories are often the same story told over and over. I listened for repeating themes. They are presented here to tell the story of librarianship in our own voices, in our own way. I hope you enjoy them.

NOTES

1. John Berry, "Problems of a 'Graying' Profession," *Library Journal* (1986), 6; L. Darby, "Abolishing Stereotypes: Recruitment and Retention of Minorities in the Library Profession," *Bookmobiles and Outreach Services* 7(2), (2004), 9-18; A. V. Level and J. Blair, "Holding On to Our Own: Factors Affecting the Recruitment and Retention of Science Librarians," *Science and Technology Libraries* 27(1/2), (2006), 185-202; P. A. Mosley, "Mentoring Gen X Managers: Tomorrow's Library Leadership Is Already Here," *Library Administration and Management* 19(4), (2005), 185-92; D. Zabel and C. Van Fleet, "An Interview with 2006-07 ALISE President Connie Van Fleet," *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 47(3), (2008), 204-6; R. T. Lenzini and C. Lipscomb, "The Graying of the Library Profession: A Survey of Our Professional Association and Their Responses," *Searcher* 10(7), (2002), 88; G. Arthur, "The 'Graying' of Librarianship: Implications for Academic Library Managers," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 24(4), (1998), 323-27.
2. Billie Grace Herring, interview by Michael McCombs, October 21, 2011, video recording, transcript, A. Arro Smith "Capturing Our Stories" Oral Histories Program, 2005-2012 97/1/70, American Library Association Archives at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 14:17.
3. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); M. Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

4. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); A. Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).