



2008 Oral History for Michigianians Conference Nears

The annual Oral History for Michigianians Conference, scheduled for Friday and Saturday, November 7-8, 2008, at the Water's Edge Huron Conference Center in Rogers City, Michigan, is quickly approaching. The event, offered by the Michigan Oral History Association (MOHA) in partnership with the Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries and the Huron Shores Humanities Council, will begin with an oral history workshop on Friday starting at 1:00 p.m. Tours of area historical sites, museums and the world famous limestone quarry welcome Friday attendees.



Tom Wiener

Keynote speaker, Tom Wiener, Historian for the Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress, will speak at the Friday evening banquet in recognition of veterans. He is the author of *Voices of War: Stories of Service from the Home Front and the Front Lines* (2004) and *Forever a Soldier: Unforgettable Stories of Wartime Service* (2005).

On Saturday, November 8, the program will include Wiener and others in a roundtable discussion focused on veterans' stories in print, on film and electronic media. Other programs will include subjects as marine history; quilters and their stories; Michigan's celebration of The Year of the Car and labor; community culture and traditions; and student experience in oral history and writing.

Terry Wooten, Michigan Humanities Touring Artist, oral historian and poet/bard will chair a session focused on student experiences in oral history and writing made possible prior to the conference by the Huron Shores Humanities Council. Wooten's latest book is *Child of War* (Oorlogskind) composed from interviews conducted with Hannie (Prins) Kuieck, witness of military disaster and survivor of the hunger winter of 1944.

Continuing Education Units for teachers and librarians are available. See www.michiganoha.org for updates to the program, registration procedures and lodging information.

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Terry Wooten

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The Different Faces of Oral History



The final selection of our next president is now underway and a decision about who will be our next Commander and Chief will soon be known. The membership of the Michigan Oral History Association (MOHA) faces a similar situation, only much easier. If you would like to throw your hat into this much friendlier election process please contact the MOHA secretary, Geneva Kebler Wiskemann. She can be reached at **517-321-1746** or **gwiskemann@arq.net**. I look forward to a large candidate pool this election season for many available positions.

The main story in this issue of the *Newsletter* concerns the interesting approach David Boeve of Holland, Michigan, has taken with his own oral history projects, initiated in 1991 while a high school student. While many of us have similar versions of our initiation into the field, Boeve's approaches continue to evolve with the technology available to him. I think you will enjoy reading about his experiences and where it is leading him as an oral historian in the 21st century.

Geoffrey Reynolds

Michigan Oral History Association Leadership

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Audio Memories: A New Look at Doing Oral History

Is a picture really worth 1000 words? How many words is that unidentified photo worth that you found in Grandma's dresser after she was gone? Who were those people? Why did grandma have that photo? What was Grandma's biggest disappointment in life? How did she meet your Grandpa? How valuable would those unidentified photos be if you had a recording of Grandma talking about each photo? Why do we have so many photos and so few recordings of our family sharing their stories?

My father-in-law has a 40 year old reel-to-reel recording of his parents wishing him well when he was in the Army. But he doesn't have a recording of them talking about their lives. We've had the technology to record our parents' voices for over 50 years. First with reel-to-reel, then 8-track, analog cassette, digital cassette, and now direct to digital with compact disks and mp3 files. Even with this technology, we're failing to preserve the oral stories of World War II veterans who are dying at a rate of 1,200 per day.

My first oral-history interview was recorded in 1991 with my grandmother. This project, assigned by my high school history teacher, Mrs. Joanne Theron, provided not only an insight into my grandma's youth, but also provided a cherished memory 10 years after my grandma passed away. In October

2006, I was cleaning my basement when I found a cassette within a box of stuff from high school. That cassette contained the interview from 15 years earlier. For almost an hour and a half, I sat listening to my grandma's voice sharing stories of her youth. She talked about how a local boy threatened her teacher with a knife in the two room school house in Drenthe, Michigan. Grandma shared how her dad was intrigued by the steel workers throwing red hot rivets while building the Warm Friend Hotel in Holland, Michigan. She talked about how pale Grandpa's face turned when he learned the tornado had ripped off half the barn roof in 1956. I wouldn't have known any of these stories had Mrs. Theron not assigned the project back in 1991.



Sometimes it's just a simple sound that transports us back to a moment in time. That interview was recorded in my grandma's kitchen. The clock in her living chimed several times while we were talking. Now, when I close my eyes while hearing the clock chime behind Grandma's voice, I feel like I'm right back in Grandma's kitchen. If sound has such a powerful effect on our memory, why don't we put as much energy into collecting and preserving sound and stories as we put into collecting and preserving photos?

Our lives are filled memories attached to sound. Sounds that mean nothing to someone else may bring you back to a specific time or place. The first tractor my father bought was a 1963 IH Farmall 504. We used this tractor almost everyday on our small dairy farm while I was growing up. The sound of the brake pedal recoiling against its metal stop brings me right back to all the summer days baling hay and all the Spring Breaks cleaning cow pens. Hearing a train horn at a street crossing reminds me of two things: my freshman year on campus at Hope College, and Jen Pelon, the 80 year-old lady who lived across the corner from my boyhood home. Jen would predict rain based

Project Spotlight (cont.)

on how loud the train horn could be heard on her farm two miles from the Holland – Chicago track. As this train horn demonstrates, often times a sound will remind us of people as well as locations.

My family has piles of pictures of my grandparents. But even with the availability of audio technology for the past 50 years, I only have one recording of her voice, sharing her stories, telling about her life. These are stories that I had never heard before that interview in 1991. These stories make up the history of our family. Thanks to that interview,



Grandpa and Grandma Albers

my children can hear these stories my grandma's own voice even though she had passed away before any of them were born. How many stories will you be able to share with your children after your parents or grandparents are gone?

Listening to this recording, I realized that everyone should be able to share their family stories with future generations. It's actually quite easy to record and preserve your important life stories. You really only need three things: something to record with, a comfortable place to sit, and some questions to start the conversation. From a \$15 Sony cassette recorder, to an iPod with a microphone, to the personal computer, to the direct-to-CD digital recorder, our houses are full of machines designed to record the human voice. Our houses are also full of comfortable places to sit. I like the kitchen table. The hard surface might not be quite as acoustically friendly as the living room sofa, but it's

where I remember having the important conversations growing up. But sit where your story teller is comfortable. Once you're comfortable, start asking questions. Ask what you're curious about. Don't worry about whether you're asking the "right" questions. Just ask the questions you want to know about. Those will be the "right" questions 15 years from now when you're listening to the recording.

Here are some examples of responses that I have heard during recent conversations:

Frank Zinger, a World War Two veteran, learned a lesson about trust as a young man. A split second decision by a new guard at his army base in Germany during World War II taught Frank a vivid lesson about who not to trust.

"I remember one time we were in our company area there, it was in that Hertgen Forest. I remember that. We had passwords. [Anytime a vehicle came, a guy on guard would] stop that vehicle and ask for the password and they'd give it to him. If they couldn't give it to him, he'd cut loose on them or capture them or whatever he could do. One kid was a green kid there and a jeep pulled up with a colonel in it and a driver and he said 'what's the password?' The colonel said: 'Password, hell! Where's Colonel Wilinghelm?' Which was our regimental commander and the kid

Project Spotlight (cont.)

said: 'Right over there at Head Quarters'. So [the jeep] drove over there and threw a bunch of hand grenades in there and blew 'em up. That was where we really learned you don't trust nobody. They had American uniforms on. They had an American Jeep. Looked just like the rest of us and talked just like us. That's the way it went."

Recollections about wartime events don't focus solely on mistrust and carnage. Sometimes they even result in love. Consider the following story about how Don met his wife, Dorothy.

How did you meet your wife?

"On a Greyhound bus. She threw paper wads at me. I was sleeping. She took advantage of me really. I was coming back from Korea and there was six or seven of us that came back together from the same outfit and we'd be partying a bit along the way in San Francisco and places like that so we were all on the bus headed east and my wife got on in Omaha, Nebraska. I saw her get on but I didn't pay no attention. Just another girl getting on the bus. By the time we got to Chicago, instead of going home to Michigan, I got another ticket to ride with her to Canton, Ohio. For some reason I followed her there.

Did she invite you along?

Well, I don't think she had anything to do with it I just did it. I was determined. I think we were both determined. We got off the bus, went to her house, met her family, and got married three days later. That was 54 years ago.

Most churches ask all their members to come in for photos in order to create a church photo directory every few years. Again, we produce a pile of pictures with no stories. What if every church had a 60 minute interview with every member over 70 years old? What kind of stories would we hear? We'd hear how an 85 year old member reacted when her husband was killed in an auto accident 40 years earlier.



Frank Zinger

"For many, many months I would say: 'God, you took him, but you can bring him back. God, you took him, but you can bring him back.' I was angry with God, I was very angry with God, and then one night the door opened in my bedroom, and the person of Dad - I think it was an angel - said: 'Now this is enough' and it was Dad - I suppose it was a dream, whatever - but then I could handle it.

These particular stories were known to the families of the story tellers, but the families still appreciate having a recording of the stories being shared in their parent's voice. However, just a 60 minute conversation uncovered multiple stories unknown to family members.

What if I hadn't rummaged through that old box of stuff in 2006? That 16 year old recording of my grandmother's childhood would still be sitting in a box waiting to be unknowingly thrown away. For that reason, if you're going to go through the effort of recording your family's stories, take the final step of selecting a permanent repository for your conversation. At minimum, this should be a fire proof safe where you keep your will

Project Spotlight (cont.)

and estate papers. It could also be a local museum, library, or historical society. An archives facility like the Joint Archives of Holland is a great choice for several reasons. First, the staff of a professional archive understands media storage and historical significance. Second, the systems are established to control release of information. Through an organized archive, information is accessible to researchers and future family members. Also, in the event of sensitive information, restrictions can even be placed on the release of history



The interior of Boeve's portable recording studio.

conversations don't have to be held exclusively to senior citizens. Graduations and weddings are also great times to record family stories. What better time for a couple to reflect on how they met than while they plan their wedding? As a child, mom and dad would record my brother, sister, and me reading, making up stories, and even playing a card game called "Pit". Now those recordings are enjoyed as much as our baby books! My kids think it's especially funny to listen to me talk when I was their age.

Preserving life stories shouldn't be overwhelming. The experience of sitting down with someone and sharing memories should be enjoyable. Whether you are listen-

ing to your 95 year-old grandmother share about raising seven boys or your 18 year-old college student reflect on his college selection process, focus on understanding the person, who they are, and how they have experienced life. Even accidental oral-histories will be appreciated by future generations and enjoyed by family members someday. Grab a recorder, meet a friend, and start talking!

About the Author: *David Boeve is founding director of Audio Memories which focuses on connecting generations by sharing stories. From collecting stories of 1000 people over the age of 70 within the Reformed and Christian Reformed churches for the 1000 Voice Project to recording and submitting war time stories for the Veterans History Project, Audio Memories believes everybody has a story worth sharing. Additional information about Audio Memories and the 1000 Voices project is available at www.AudioMemories.org.*



The Michigan Oral History Association is a 501c3 non-profit corporation under Michigan law.

Board Member Spotlight

In future issues of the *MOHA Newsletter*, a member of the board of directors or an officer will be spotlighted so that our growing membership can become more familiar with them and their involvement in oral history, among other interests. In this issue, Geneva Kebler Wiskemann, the Association's long-time secretary, is spotlighted.

Geneva began working for the Library of Michigan's circulation department in 1946. She served as Personal Aid to the State Librarian after a 1951 fire caused severe damage to the library, and afterward took charge of the book service area in the Capitol Building.

In 1955, Dr. Phil Mason brought Wiskemann into the State Archives of Michigan as a research assistant. She spent a good deal of her own time and money tracking down and purchasing historical photographs of Michigan, which she then donated to the State Archives.

Over many years, Wiskemann has volunteered her time to many historical organizations. She co-founded the Clinton County Historical Society, the REO Transportation Museum, and the Historical Society of Greater Lansing, to name but three. Her publications include *Reproduction of the Topographical Map of the Counties of Ingham and Livingston, Michigan*, and *Oral History: A Guide for the Media Specialist*.

Geneva also received a State History Award for Distinguished Volunteer Service from the Historical Society of Michigan in 2005.

Please seek her out at the next MOHA event you attend and thank her for all of her hard work for association.



Historical Society of Michigan Board of Trustee's representative Robert Myers presenting Geneva Kebler Wiskemann the 2005 State History Award for Distinguished Volunteer Service. *Historical Society of Michigan photo.*

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