
OHMAR Newsletter

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“Enthrallment with Local History”

The Forrest Pogue Award Interview with Sara Collins

Sara J. Collins, the 1997 winner of the Forrest C. Pogue Award, was one of the founding members of OHMAR, its first vice-president and president in 1977-78. She retired in 1996 after 22 years as Virginia Librarian of the Arlington Public Library, where she was active in the development of the oral history program. The interview below was conducted by Judith Knudsen, the newly elected president of OHMAR, who is director of the Community Archives at the Arlington Public Library.

Knudsen: Sara, please tell us about your background before oral history—where you grew up and your educational background.

Collins: I was born in Michigan and raised in Royal Oak, a Detroit suburb, in a family all interested in history. I was always fascinated by the stories my father remembered from his conversations with his grandfather about the family roots in Scotland, moving to New Brunswick and then to Ontario, where they pioneered along the Thames in Upper Canada, near where there stands a monument to Tecumseh's fall.

One of my minors at Albion College in Michigan was history, but I really became enthused about local history when I studied at the library school at Catholic University. My thesis was an imprint survey and history of publishing in Michigan before the Civil War, which I researched mainly at the Library of Congress, at the Burton Historical Collection at Detroit Public Library, and at the libraries at the University of Michigan. Trying to solve the mysteries of a particular time and place and using the historical materials in collections certainly got me hooked on the values of preserving the materials of local history. I think a research project such as this was most valuable later in guiding others doing historical research.

The next step toward this enthrallment with local history came when I started working at the library and found materials about our community to answer reference questions. And I immersed myself in reading these. Arlington's history indeed was most fascinating, and probably because it was hidden: so much of the physical evidence of its past was obliterated by the late sixties, when I became conscious through the written history. Of course, I was so pleased later to be appointed to work with the local materials.

Knudsen: When did you first become aware of oral history?

Collins: When I became Virginia Librarian at the Arlington County Public Library (Arlington, Virginia), in 1975, I became aware of the limits of information in the collection about our county. There were a few texts and a pictorial history of Arlington, some clippings from newspapers, and some excellent researched articles in the local historical magazine, but not much information on the neighborhoods, people, and events that shaped Arlington County or which composed its day-to-day life, particularly its African-American residents. The county was gearing up for Bicentennial celebrations, and library patrons, including county staff, were trying to document information on our history and researching information on the oldest families in what had become Arlington County. Then one glorious day I came across some documents in a file: interviews with residents of a senior center in one of our older black communities. These were people with very long ties to Arlington. There were also group interviews with an earlier librarian and a county notable. This was a project initiated by my predecessor, Kathleen Smith, and Marilyn Gell, in collaboration with the Arlington Historical Society.

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Knudsen: How did this inspire you to become involved in the process of oral history?

Collins: My excitement must have been infectious within the library. At that time in the mid-seventies, the county was revving up for the celebrations for the Bicentennial, and the county offered incentives to organizations who wished to support commemorative activities. Caroline Arden was the library's public relations official, and when members of the Arlington Zonta approached the library to see how they could apply their resources toward a project that would make a lasting contribution to their public library, they were told about and examined several options. The oral history appealed to this service group of professional women, and they offered to support the library in its efforts to begin an oral history project.

Knudsen: Tell us how the project got started.

Collins: Several meetings with Zonta members indicated their level of support: a workshop to train volunteers, financial help for obtaining equipment and the transcribing. Since I was very unfamiliar with oral history, I began seeking information. There was so little in print then, and the term did not even appear in library catalogs or in periodical indices. So when a librarian needs information, he or she goes to the high tech medium—then the telephone. I believe it was then I contacted Dr. Pogue, as I saw his name mentioned in my predecessor's files as a source who had helped with guidance to the earlier project.

Eventually, all roads lead to Martha Ross, whom I found, and soon I was meeting with Martha at the Department of Labor, where she was working on an oral history project. We met in her office and discussed what was needed to get the project underway. This was the session where her youngest daughter, Marie, who had come to work with her mother, became bored with all this oral history talk and crawled under a desk to sleep.

As all oral historians in this area know, all good things start with Martha, and by the end of our meeting, I began to understand more what was involved in oral history, and how we could get started, and who might be able to help with this. It was to begin with an all-day workshop at the library, but with a kick-off program the evening before to explain what oral history was and what it could accomplish for the library. Meanwhile, the library began the process of publicizing the project and recruiting volunteers.

Knudsen: Tell me about the workshop.

Collins: At the evening program, there were three very inspirational speakers: a woman from the League of Women Voters oral history program in Montgomery County; Dr. Peter Olch, oral historian at the National Library of Medicine; and Dr. Forrest Pogue. I remember particularly that session because people were so fascinated with Dr. Pogue's experiences and continued to ask questions—the library was closing, the lights went out, and a group followed Forrest out to the parking lot of the library, where he didn't hesitate to continue the lecture and answer questions. (I was driving him home but had trouble getting him on the road.)

The next day was a full one. Alan Fusonie, from the Department of Agriculture Library, lectured very effectively on the need for preparatory research before interviewing; Betty Key talked about the steps needed to get the oral histories accomplished and into the library system; and Martha Ross taught us all about the interviewing process and directed some actual interviewing practice sessions among the attendees. What I remember most about this workshop was how cleverly both Betty and Martha let these potential oral history volunteers know that not all people are suited to interviewing itself and some who may not be good listeners and who would rather talk should consider some other aspect of the process. These volunteers knew where they would fit in best and offered to do research, help with processing, etc., rather than do the interviewing. We all finished the day excited and exhausted and ready to plan our next steps.

Knudsen: What happened next?

Collins: An advisory board was formed from the volunteers, and we met a number of times to outline priorities, list interviewees, processes, determine what equipment was needed (which Zonta provided), and plan the steps involved. At the workshop and subsequent meetings, a list began of people who should be interviewed, based on age and experiences. We were not focussed on a narrow subject but a rather broad-based one, of interviewees who had long residence and/or involvement in the county and their areas of knowledge where we knew we needed more documentation. Since we had so little at the time, the broadness of our goals worked. The smallness of our county made this possible and easier to match up the volunteers and their interests with what we at the library needed.

The equipment was acquired, interviews started, and early ones were transcribed by a professional secretaries' organization recruited by our

brought a lot of family photos and documents to donate to the library, and as he queried the donor on each item he would label it on the artifact and in the interview as exhibit 1, exhibit 2, etc. We were very fortunate to have Ed work with us until his death two years ago.

As his vision deteriorated and it became impossible for him to read his interview notes and operate the recorder, our director recruited an excellent collaborator to work with him. Cas Cocklin, too, had been involved in much of Arlington's civic life and had interviewed people when she was editor of the Arlington Historical Society's Newsletter. Cas was interested as well in home and neighborhood life, so she provided this dimension. It took a while to work out the balance of dual interviewers, but soon we had an excellent interviewing team. The result is fantastic documentation. You can imagine what a blow it was when both died within months of each other.

Knudsen: I've noticed that not all interviews were done by these two. Who else was involved?

Collins: You are right. Often a graduate student would be researching an Arlington topic and could be persuaded to do an interview or a group of interviews for the assignment and share it with us using our deeds. Some other interviews were done by county planning staff who needed more information about a neighborhood. One of our biggest problems came about when a graduate student was doing interviews for us on a disappearing (redeveloping) neighborhood. She did the work of tracking down long-time residents, including those who had already moved to other communities, and also made the appointments for the interviews. It was not necessary when Ed and Cas were doing the interviews to send our "introductory" letter, and we bypassed this procedure with this student and learned what a mistake that was. The student had made an appointment to interview an elderly woman, and when her family and lawyer learned of this, they became alarmed, as she was involved in a lawsuit having to do with the sale of her land and the interview request raised suspicions about this being the "other side" seeking information.

Needless to say, we returned in such cases to our regular procedures of sending the advance letter. And you did some interviews yourself when they related to the history of the library branch where you were located. It has been fortunate that we have been able to take advantage of such opportunities when they arose.

Knudsen: What changes have you noticed over the years about the interviews in which you were involved?

Collins: may have mentioned that the earlier interviews were carried out in the subject's territory. That was right for that time, as most people were not accustomed to being recorded. In fact, many (and especially women) had to be convinced that the tape recorder was not dangerous and what they had to say was important to us. For most of our interviews earlier, the subjects were more at ease in the comfort and familiarity of their own homes. Of course, this led to some weird sounds on the tapes, of phones ringing, doors slamming, or traffic passing by the house. The controlled environment of the library (and better equipment) does generally make for a better sound recording, and almost everyone is comfortable now with the tape recorder. In addition, the use of these interviews has through the years pointed out the need to follow up and specify information. Our transcribers were particularly aware of lapses when questions weren't asked or followed up, so their notes were helpful when we sent the draft of the interview to the interviewee and we could encourage clarification in the cover letter.

Knudsen: What are some of the uses that have been made of the interviews?

Collins: That could take a book to answer! Primarily for research purposes on a person, neighborhood, or county event. Perhaps the most intensive use has been by authors, students, and program planners researching the very traumatic period when Arlington defied the state's policy of massive resistance and insisted upon keeping its schools open. The interviews have been particularly useful to county officials: they answered such questions as how Arlington arranged to get its water supply from the Corps of Engineers (an interview told us it was an act of Congress) or the reasoning behind much legislation or policy-- particularly useful when Arlington was submitting a plan to Department of Justice to specify how recent school board elections would be carried out. When Arlington earlier was the only county in Virginia with an elected school board, the procedures and reasoning behind it was answered in interviews. This provision of legislative rationale has been an eye-opener to me: my intuition earlier was that all these governmental procedures would be documented in other sources and that we should put our resources on other topics. The reality is that county and state government do not have a Congressional Register-type of account, and except for what has been written or recorded by those responsible for legislation or department policy decision, we lack that specific detail.

A few years ago a local delegate to our General Assembly drove up from Richmond on a

participant in that library's process of collecting that history. For the Arlington Public Library, with its fine archives collection, the oral histories are a most useful corollary to those personal or organization records. I have seen, as our collection matures, how another generation is discovering a family member's "voice" in their own public library, and it is a tearful and rewarding find.

You haven't asked it yet, but I do want to say a word about oral history as a project. It isn't something that one person does: I am not the creator and doer of Arlington's oral history collection. As I have mentioned, we have had the continuing support and interest of a special organization, the Arlington Zonta club throughout all these years. Without our volunteer interviewers, who are willing to obtain the training and come to OHMAR meetings, there would be no oral history collection. Our Friends of the Library have also provided equipment and transcribing support. Think of all the people who have been interviewed: all of them cocreators with our many interviewers. If these creators hadn't given so freely of their time and memories, we wouldn't have this beautiful resource. We all know how important transcribers and other processors are to a project. And an oral history project cannot be started and maintained without the understanding and support of the institution's administration (library and government in our case). And the scholars, citizens, students who use and cite these interviews are an important part of the process. In my case I could not have initiated and kept an oral history project going without the support, encouragement and advice of fellow practitioners in the oral history field.



OHMAR News

Treasurer's Report

November 1, 1997

Beginning balance, Oct. 31,
1996, Crestar Bank \$5,389.57

Activity since last report:

Income:

Membership	870.00
Conference income	1,111.00
Contributions	1.00
Advertising	25.00
Sales	144.00

Interest	89.50
TOTAL	\$2,240.50

Expenses:

Printing	\$1,282.62
Mailing	248.96
Stationery and supplies	17.39
Food	750.00
OHA Pamphlets	262.80
Pogue award	59.36
Workshop expenses	172.60
Miscellaneous*	110.00
TOTAL	\$2,903.73

Current balance, October 31, 1997,
Crestar Bank \$4,606.34

*\$100 for air travel reimbursement for spring conference speaker and \$10 for OHMAR table at history book fair.

Respectfully submitted,
Cindy Swanson, OHMAR Treasurer



Names and News

Women Ambassadors Project

The Women Ambassadors Project is currently preparing the transcribed oral histories of women ambassadors for deposit in appropriate libraries. To date, seventeen have been completed and deposited with the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College has requested a complete set for its archives.

ADST has requested that the project, which originally comprised interviews with women who served between 1933 and 1983, be continued. To that end, they have appointed **Ann Miller Morin** a fellow of ADST, in charge of overseeing interviews with current female ambassadors as they complete their assignments.

Because of the greatly increased number of women in high positions at the State Department, she is recruiting volunteers to interview these high-achieving women. If any member of OHMAR is interested in becoming part of this project, she should contact Ms. Morin at Women Ambassadors Project, 15008 Eardley Court, Silver Spring, MD 20906. Telephone (301) 598-1142. Fax (301) 438-7181. E-mail: Ann Morin@AOL.com

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Institution	\$25
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NAMES AND NEWS

Fill out the form below to report news or information that you wish to share with the OHMAR membership. We especially welcome information about persons and projects. If this space is insufficient, feel free to attach another sheet.

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News: _____

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