Transportation Oral History-
State of the Practice and a Path Forward

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Oral History Subcommittee of the TRB Committee on Transportation History

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- John Fischer
- John Fuller
- Jonathan Gifford
- Bob Noland
- Alan Pisarski
- Rolf Schmidt
- Bob Skinner
- Ruth Steiner
- Marty Wachs
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What is Oral History?

Oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews.

• An oral history interview consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee

• The exchange is recorded in audio or video format

• Recordings of the interview are transcribed, (and) summarized or indexed and then placed in a library or archives
Benefits of Oral History

• Oral history allows you to compensate for the digital age

• Oral history allows you to learn different kinds of information

• Oral history provides historical actors with an opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words
Objectives of the Project

1. Locate existing oral histories by key participants in major transportation programs, projects, organizations, and methods.

2. Develop a comprehensive inventory of these recorded, transcribed oral histories in one permanent, publicly accessible home.

3. Find a means to rescue significant oral histories that exist but are not now accessible.

4. Propose a way forward for doing new transportation oral histories.
Surveys to Locate Oral Histories

• 50 libraries of state DOTs + DC (From Mn DOT database)

• 34 other libraries and collection (From USDOT NTL and Oral History Association)
Findings

• Over 1,000 transportation oral histories were discovered

• These are linked to a database maintained by the TRB Transportation History Committee

• [https://transporthistory.wordpress.com/oral-histories/](https://transporthistory.wordpress.com/oral-histories/)
The Arc of a Long Career

Robert Albee, Director of Construction for the Boston Massachusetts “Big Dig”

By Suffolk University and APWA
People’s History

Giving voice to those who might otherwise be hidden from historical accounts.

Oregon African American Railroad Porters Oral History Preservation Project, with 30 recorded and transcribed interviews.

Oregon State University
History of an Organization

*Kentucky Transportation Center Oral History Project* - 10 interviews

U. Kentucky Center for Oral History
Modal Policy

*Conversations with aviation leaders oral history*

Nine interviews with leaders of the industry document the legal and policy history of the airline industry during the age of global deregulation. 2006 - 2016

The DePaul University College of Law
Mega Projects

Planning and Implementation of the Interstate Highway System-

100+ interviews, conducted by AASHTO, archived at George Mason U
Contribution to a Broader Historical Enterprise

Lake Champlain Bridge Story

• A resource guide,
• Interpretive displays,
• Seven films,
• A popular history book, and
• Oral histories of twenty-two individuals with a connection to the 1929 Lake Champlain Bridge.

New York State DOT
Disasters

1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake Oral History Project-

205 Interviews with Caltrans employees who responded to the earthquake

Caltrans History Preservation Committee
Going Forward – Facilitate Collection and Preservation of New OH

1. Identify repositories for new transportation oral histories
   - USDOT National Transportation Library
   - George Mason University Library
   - Voorhees Transportation Center Library, Rutgers University
   - University of California Institute of Transportation Studies Library
Going Forward

2. Prepare a Guidebook for Conducting Transportation Oral Histories
3. Conduct Pilot Interviews
4. Develop Outreach Plan- to Identify agencies and projects to sponsor new transportation oral histories
5. Find funding
Going Forward

• This plan might marry well with individual transportation agency initiatives for knowledge management through Knowledge Interviews,

• Providing suggested standards and practices, and

• University repositories accessible to all
Questions?

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TRB Committee on Transportation History

https://transporthistory.wordpress.com/trb-history-committee/