



# ORAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

February 2021  
Volume LV Number 1

## MOVING STORIES

OHA's 2021 Annual Meeting  
October 13-17, 2021



## March 1 deadline for fall conference proposals

There's still time to send in your presentation and paper proposals for "Moving Stories," the theme of the Oct. 13-17 Oral History Association annual conference.

The OHA has an array of online resources to help you:

Here's the full Call for Proposals: <https://www.oralhistory.org/2021-call-for-papers/>

The submission portal is

here: <https://convention2.allacademic.com/one/oha/oha21>

Tips and guidelines are here: <https://www.oralhistory.org/submission-guidelines/>

If you have questions, contact any of the following:

Nikki Yeboah, 2021 Program Co-chair (San Jose State University, [nikki.yeboah@sjsu.edu](mailto:nikki.yeboah@sjsu.edu))

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President's Column



Co-Executive Directors' Report

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## “Baltimore Speaks”: Building oral history ties locally

By Catherine Mayfield, Maryland Center for History and Culture

The Oral History Associations Annual Meeting moves from city to city each year and, in each locale, a local arrangements committee provides local support - promoting the conference, organizing tours and events, identifying dignitaries and more. Members showcase some of the unique features of their metropolis, highlighting its history and culture, its tastes, sights and sounds. But what does the OHA give back?

A level of tourism and visitor traffic, yes, but perhaps also the possibility of a deeper level of community impact. Though the COVID-19 pandemic forced the 2020 Annual Meeting to take place virtually, last year's

Baltimore local arrangements committee nonetheless organized to bring a measure of Charm City online.

Among its plans, committee members discussed how to use the presence of the conference to cultivate connections among those involved in oral history locally and to understand and act upon oral history needs in the region.

A planning group mobilized to explore the feasibility of a “post-conference meeting, dubbed “Advancing Oral History in the Baltimore Region.” On Dec. 10, 2020, more than three dozen Baltimore-area oral historians, collection managers and community activists gathered online. Guided by folklorist Amy Skillman, academic director for the masters in cultural sustainability program at Goucher College, and with OHA funding support, the group embarked on a candid discussion of perceived needs and explored a vision for collaboration.

Prior to the meeting, results from a survey of invitees indicated:

- A clear desire among professional colleagues to connect and foster a sense of community in the region.
- A distinct focus on professional needs such as peer consultation and professional development.
- An interest in providing greater access to each other’s expertise and collections.
- A recognition of the need for more inclusivity and of ensuring ethical practices within the field.

During the meeting, attendees articulated a vision for a future collaborative with three key components: 1) a collective that is community driven, that amplifies the voices of all citizens in Baltimore and that recognizes narrative as a link between communities. Indeed, the group identified “Baltimore Speaks” as the favored option for a collaborative name. 2) oral histories playing a role in supporting public education. 3) an open-access multimedia platform, accessible to all communities and serving as a public repository for collections. Importantly, interwoven throughout was an emphasis on working against the grain of existing power relations within oral history.

Though the vision is ambitious, Skillman’s final report detailed recommendations for moving forward. First: “Begin with what is feasible. Spend the next year growing the network and cultivating connections,” including the formation of a steering group and activation of working groups identified by attendees. Skillman further identified administrative and programmatic steps: researching cooperative membership models; offering

periodic gatherings for professional development; and setting sights on an open-access platform to help focus fundraising efforts and cultivation of potential anchor institutions.

The path ahead is paved with challenges--funding sources to be secured, a sustained supporter base to move the initiative forward and a need for that base to be reflective of Baltimore. The virtual presence of the OHA in our region sparked connection and vibrant discussion. As we continue mobilizing, we hope the initiative also sparks ongoing consideration of how OHA might support those cities where its meetings transpire.

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## Webinar focuses on deaf perspectives in oral history, public history

When oral historian Anna Kaplan spotted a National Council on Public History call for proposals to fund virtual public history programs during the pandemic, she was intrigued.

Brainstorming with fellow oral historians Nicki Pombier and Cynthia Tobar—all members of the OHA Diversity Committee—they came up with a proposal for a webinar focusing on deaf perspectives in oral history and public history. And they made it happen.

The “In Our Own Words” webinar won a \$1,000 grant from the NCHP and got additional support from the OHA, the Public History Program at American University and the Drs. John S. & Betty Schuchman Deaf Documentary Center at Gallaudet University. Brian Greenwald, director of the Schuchman Deaf Documentary Center, collaborated with the oral historians and helped identify presenters.

The hour-long program featured three deaf New York City educators who described their own experiences conducting interviews aimed at documenting deaf culture in New York, drawing particularly on interviews with elderly deaf New Yorkers who related experiences from a time when the use of sign language, for example, was less common than it is today.

The participants were Carlos Aponte-Salcedo, Brianna DiGiovanni and Alexandria Pucciarelli, with Pombier serving as moderator and Kaplan

introducing the program.

Aponte-Salcedo, who described conducting three extensive interviews with his Puerto Rican immigrant father, suggested that interviewing deaf narrators and preserving their stories is no different than documenting lives and stories of other marginalized communities, and is equally important.

Like all oral history practitioners, panelists emphasized the importance of establishing relationships between interviewer and interviewee. That can be a particular challenge if the interviewer is not deaf or does not share the same language as a deaf American Sign Language-using interviewee.

Efforts at establishing rapport can involve something as simple as asking the deaf interviewee to watch a signed video describing the consent form, for example, rather than giving the narrator written paperwork that is not in their first language, DiGiovanni suggested.

The panelists also emphasized the importance of having deaf experts on an oral history team, particularly when it comes to achieving accurate translations of a signed interview into written English.

While about 60 people attended the live presentation on Dec. 8, 2020, the recorded webinar is available on the Schuchman Center's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=362ezTwsj6s>.

Kaplan said she hoped the webinar would spark more conversation about deaf oral history and storytelling and the centrality of “orality” for oral history.

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## OHA Metadata Task Force offers white paper

After a two-year survey and analysis project, the Oral History Association's Metadata Task Force invites oral historians to take a look at its new white paper outlining major takeaways from the project. You can find it here: [https://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/OHA-MTF-White-Paper\\_2020.pdf](https://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/OHA-MTF-White-Paper_2020.pdf)

The white paper is intended to inform oral history archival practice and to share a snapshot of what tools oral history practitioners are using to

catalog and describe oral histories.

The task force noted that “there isn’t one system or tool being used across the board for oral history description, and that perhaps there need not be.”

Rather, the task force said, “Practitioners are currently mixing and matching various schemas, tools and systems that meet their needs.”

Task force members are: Lauren Kata, NYU Abu Dhabi Library; Natalie Milbrodt, Queens Public Library; Steven Sielaff, Baylor University Institute for Oral History; and Jaycie Vos, University of Northern Iowa Rod Library.

If you have comments or questions, you can reach them at: [oha.metadata@gmail.com](mailto:oha.metadata@gmail.com).

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## *Oral History Review* notes staff changes

By David Caruso, *OHR* Editor

In early 2020, Elissa Stroman, copy editor for the *OHR*, shared some exciting news with the co-editors of the journal: she was asked to become the editor of the *West Texas Historical Review*, a great honor and one she clearly could not pass up. Given the production needs of the *OHR*'s Summer/Fall issue, Elissa let us know that she would stay on through the completion of that issue but would then need to move on, a gracious offer for which we were thankful.

Copyediting is a critical task for any journal, helping authors fully realize their submissions and making sure that every comma, semicolon, footnote and subclause provides concise clarity and meets with journal style. Finding a new copy editor at the best of times is a challenge; doing so amid a pandemic and broader social, cultural, political and economic injustices even more so.

Fortunately, the *OHR* was able to find someone very quickly: our previous copy editor, Elinor Mazé. While I was certainly prepared to beg, implore, enjoin, adjure, beseech, entreat Elinor to come back to the journal (six words that mean the same thing, which Elinor certainly would have advised me to fix if I had sent this piece to her), that was not needed in the least.

And with that, the co-editors of the *OHR* happily announce Elinor's return to the journal, hitting the ground running to get the first issue of 2021 ready for production with Routledge. We worked with Elinor when we started our tenure as co-editors and knew her well from our previous work with and submissions to the journal. She joined the editorial team under Kathy Nasstrom and Troy Reeves's tenure. It is wonderful to be working with her again, and we know that our authors will greatly appreciate her keen eye and devotion to the *OHR* as much as we do.

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## Rob Perks retires from “dream job” at British Library

British oral historian Rob Perks, a frequent presenter and participant at Oral History Association conferences, has announced he will retire March 31 from the British Library, where he served as its first oral history curator in 1988 and became its director of National Life Stories in 1996.

“Working as the BL's oral history curator has been my dream job, and I'm enormously proud of what we've achieved over the past three decades,” Perks said.

Under Perks's leadership, the library has earned international acclaim for its Millennium Memory Bank, which includes nearly 400 interviews aimed at preserving the wide range of British dialects and accents, as well as its unique Unlocking Our Sound Heritage project, which includes more than 6 million recordings of speech, music, wildlife and the environment.

Perks also is known to many OHA members for his textbook, *The Oral History Reader*, now in its third edition.

In a statement, Perks recalled: “When I started out, I believed that oral history was a democratic means for helping to change the world for the better: by giving a voice (and most importantly a place in the archive) to those marginalised, suppressed or forgotten by history; by questioning prejudice and stereotype; and by making history more vibrant, relevant and engaging for everyone. I still believe that, and if, over the last 30 years, the BL's oral history collections have inspired, challenged and surprised, and encouraged us all to listen, understand and value each other better, then it has been worthwhile.”

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# In India, Gen Z drawn to oral history

The Oral History Association of India reports a surge of interest among young adults in recording everyday experiences on digital devices and social media, according to a recent report in The Hindustan Times.

The OHAI has experienced notably oversubscribed oral history workshops, with particular enthusiasm among students eager for collaborative opportunities.

The Hindustan Times noted: “With the world in a tailspin, oral histories have never seemed more urgent. For self-preservation. To add to collective memory. And to make sense of who we were, how we got here, and where it could all be headed.”

Check out the full story here: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/art-and-culture/for-the-record-gen-z-is-taking-to-oral-history/story-huPTFygdABf5ptClvLJQHI.html>

*[The OHA Newsletter editor thanks Don Ritchie for calling this item to our attention.]*

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Mary Kay Quinlan, Editor*

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# Co-Executive Directors' Report

**By Kristine McCusker**  
**February 2021 Newsletter**

We hope that, during in the difficulties of a pandemic and political and economic uncertainty, you are surviving.

The OHA is navigating the perils of the pandemic well, thanks to the hard work of Council, volunteers and our intrepid Program Associate Faith Bagley. We are busy planning #OHA2021 and are pursuing positive approaches to holding a meeting in a time of pandemic. We are still monitoring the situation, preparing for the possibility of another virtual meeting, and will know more soon. Once we know for certain, we will send an email to the membership.

In the meantime, we are finding new opportunities to promote the organization:

- This year, we will conduct two oral history trainings for regional library systems in Tennessee.
- Thanks to support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, we are publishing online our most compelling 2020 conference sessions. They will be available by the end of February and will be open to the public.
- Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez will be conducting an OHA-sponsored workshop on Latinx oral histories for the Organization of American Historians on April 15 from noon-1:30 p.m. EST. Special thanks to Virginia Espino for organizing this session. Pre-registration with OAH is required.

We are also helping Troy Reeves, the OHA's new treasurer, ease into his job. He has already been a stellar support, providing good observations and wry asides as we make finance and insurance decisions. He also enjoys horrifying us southerners with horror stories of snowy Wisconsin.

We are in the process of setting up new financial systems (e.g. making Paypal a payment option) that will make it easier for our members.

As always, if there's anything the OHA can do, please let us know. Until we hear from you then, best—or at least better—for 2021.

# President's Column

**By Dan Kerr**  
**February 2021 Newsletter**

The Oral History Association's Vision Statement: *We envision a world where a deep humanistic understanding of the past, developed through a process of listening and mutual respect, shapes a more inclusive and equitable future.*

The waning days of the Trump administration posed unprecedented challenges for the United States as a whole as well as for the Oral History Association. On Jan. 6 a mob of Trump supporters sought to overthrow our democratic form of governance, displaying symbols of hate while claiming to be patriots.

Less than two weeks later, the Trump administration issued the "The 1776 Report," which attacked a half century of historical scholarship, called for a form of government indoctrination of American students and provided ideological justification for the failed coup. The OHA joined with dozens of other academic associations to sign onto statements issued by the American Historical Association denouncing both of these developments ([January 6th Statement](#) and [1776 Statement](#)).

In considering OHA's position on these statements, OHA Council and the Executive Office realized we need to make more transparent the process we have in place for making quick decisions on the issuance of public statements. Our [OHA Policy on Public Resolutions](#) states that ultimate authority to approve public statements rests with OHA Council. However, the language that follows assumes a lengthy process linked to our Annual Business Meeting. We hope to clarify this process with additional language that will be presented to the OHA membership this year that delineates how decisions are made outside of our annual meeting.

At any time, members can reach out to the Executive office or any Council member seeking support for public statements on issues that impact our field. If Council does not support intervention, members will have recourse to bring their proposal before our membership using the process laid out in the existing OHA Policy on Public Resolutions.

The Committee Restructuring Task Force, which seeks to realign committees so that we can more effectively push our strategic plan forward, has proposed that OHA develop a model where members can self-organize into officially recognized caucuses.

Such caucuses would provide a means for members to affect the direction of the OHA from the bottom up. Now is a great time to start thinking of the caucuses that you would like to form or be a part of. Other ideas that are being considered include the formation of a Development Committee and Advocacy Committee. If you have any suggestions for the task force to consider, please reach out to the Executive Office and these ideas will be considered by the task force.

After a lengthy search, the OHA now has a new treasurer, Troy Reeves. He will chair the Finance Committee, advise the OHA on all budgetary matters and be a non-voting participant in our monthly Council meetings. In anticipation that a Development Committee will be formally established this year, we have formed a Development Task Force that is chaired by Stephen Sloan. Troy Reeves and I will work closely with this task force as we seek to institute regular and standardized development practices within the OHA.

This work is critical as we begin the first stages of planning the transition of our Executive Office. Council approved the formation of an Executive Office Search Committee that will include Kelly Navies, LuAnn Jones and Zaheer Ali. We expect the OHA will issue a Request for Proposals by early summer. Please seriously consider pitching your own proposal to serve as OHA's next Executive Director.

It is never too late to get involved with one of the OHA committees or task forces that are essential for advancing OHA's mission. If you would like to get more involved, please send a note to [oha@oralhistory.org](mailto:oha@oralhistory.org).