OHA NEWSLETTER

August 2026

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

By Sarah Milligan



As I am entering the last quarter of my presidential year for the Oral History Association, I wanted to reflect on some organizational milestones. In the past 12 months we surpassed the million-dollar mark for our endowment, surpassed a 1,000-member threshold months ahead of the annual meeting, seen a record 294 proposals for the annual meeting in Portland, OR, and hosted 250 registered attendees for the 3rd biennial virtual summer symposium. I am excited to see these indicators of growth and a healthy organizational support infrastructure. I am grateful we receive continued support and engagement from decades long members and a growing number of new members discovering a professional organizational home. As our audience grows and changes, so does our organizational structure supports and team.

As you have recently seen, the Executive Office team currently hosted at Baylor University is transitioning out of this role at the end of 2027. We are indebted to Stephen Sloan and Steven Sielaff for their leadership during the 5-year period of organizational hosting and grateful for the administrators at Baylor University for supporting their time and resources during this period. We have thrived under their leadership. As an organization in its 60th year of operation, Dr. Sloan is only the 3rd organizational Executive Director, a model we shifted to in 2013 with the leadership of Cliff Kuhn and Georgia State University, followed by Louis Kyriakoudes and Kris McCukser and Middle Tennessee State University. As we begin the search for a new executive office home to transition to in 2028, I am grateful for our generations of leadership which has brought us to this point. Thanks to years of fiscal shepherding, we are able to increase (even if modestly) our financial support for the new executive office and, for the first time in history, have supported a multi-year full-time OHA employee in our amazing Program Associate, Hailey Rowe. Transitions are challenging, but our potential is bright.

For those of you nurturing a spark of "what if" in contemplating the next 5-year Executive Office opportunity, I encourage you to reach out to the 2028 Executive Office Search Committee chair, Todd Moye to schedule a conversation. There's never been a more exciting time to join leadership of the OHA and we need strong leaders to continue to build on the current swell of momentum. I personally have gained so much from the relationships I have built during my time in various leadership roles over the last 10 years with this organization and am grateful for the opportunity to collaborate on advancing our field and supporting our members. I want to thank members, committees, chairs, and the council for all the time and expertise you regularly share to make this organization thrive. It has been a pleasure to work alongside such committed and supportive colleagues.

DIRECTORS' COLUMN

By Steven Sielaff



Online Offerings Abound!

While it may be natural to take a break or slow things down during the summer, OHA continues to look for ways to engage its membership and provide great content. This was never more evident that during our June virtual symposium "Trauma-Informed Interviewing, Reckoning & Beyond," which featured fourteen wonderfully curated sessions and lively subsequent discussions. Our virtual symposia are now a regular feature of the organization, taking place every other summer, and allowing members to attend at a discounted rate. In addition, those who register either before, during, or after the program gain access to the recordings of the entire event, while all OHA members are able to view the recordings beginning in January of the following year.

Regular webinar series are also offered year-round to members thanks to the work and planning of OHA's volunteers. Recent highlights include an introduction to caucuses from the OHA caucus co-chairs, the OHA Publications Committee's Conference Theme Series on oral history and the environment, and the OHA Public Program Committee's exploration of the intersection of AI and Transcription. While some of these programs are designed to be public facing, those that require a registration fee are always free to active OHA members. Be on the lookout for our next scheduled offering in September when I will host a conversation with Jason Steinhauer, author of *History, Disrupted: How Social Media & the World Wide Web Have Changed the Past*, where we will discuss how oral historians can best advocate for and publicize their work.

Additionally, I wanted to shine a light on the website content being developed by the Oral History Review editorial team for their OHR Extra! series. After each edition the team interviews article authors or shines a brighter light on certain oral history projects or archives. From the recent Spring edition, the team interviewed Doug Boyd about his roundtable article in the AI and Ethics special section, Eleanor Paynter concerning her interviews with Ukrainian refugees in Italy, and Lynn Lewis who discusses the relationships between participatory action research, community organizing, and oral history.

Finally, I'd like to remind everyone that the OHA Annual Business Meeting, which for years languished at an ungodly hour early on the last day of the annual meeting, is now a virtual event that takes place a couple of weeks before the in-person conference. While this change has certainly increased attendance numbers in the past two years, I feel there is still improvement to be made in that area. Therefore, I implore you to keep your eyes peeled for the announcement of this year's business meeting and join us to hear more about the good work of association and the plans for the year ahead!

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

SHANNA FARRELL, ANNA SHEFTEL, & FRANCINE SPANG-WILLIS



Shanna Farrell



Anna Sheftel



Francine Spang-Willis

The Oral History Association hosted a virtual, three-day symposium in June, "Trauma-Informed Interviewing, Reckoning & Beyond." In honor of their incredible work organizing this symposium on behalf of the association, Shanna Farrell, Anna Sheftel, and Francine Spang-Willis are this issue's Volunteer Spotlight.

The primary goal of this symposium was to help oral historians think both ethically and expansively about interviewing the contexts of of trauma. As each of the three co-chairs came from different backgrounds, they each had their own preoccupations about what it meant to do this work well. For Anna, this meant balancing what the ethical considerations are when working with difficult stories with what the obligations to do something meaningful to work towards justice are. It was important for her to design a symposium that was not a prescriptive, "how-to," but instead showed the diverse range of projects this work applies to so that people had examples of quality practice. Francine expanded that this required the committee to demonstrate practices starting at the conception of a project all the way through the long-term care of the stories entrusted to practitioners.

The combined experience of the three co-chairs created the diverse background of examples they were looking to demonstrate. Francine works with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous narrators to tell a fuller and richer story of the muli-layered landscape. Shanna has worked on diverse oral history projects that range from disability to Japanese internment. Anna has worked with the oral histories of genocide and migration, particularly with Holocaust survivors. With each of these experiences, the co-chairs were forced to break out of their own boxes to explore beyond the prescribed ways of conducting oral history and instead consider the flexibility of the practice, especially when considering trauma.

Thanks to the lead of these co-chairs, participants left with new ideas they learned the several projects they heard from oral historians around the country. Learning that trauma-informed oral history is an ethical framework that shapes a project allows practitioners to use it as a space for healing, advocacy, and preservation.

For those that could not attend the symposium, the co-chairs left a few pieces of advice for all:

- Be attentive and engaged
- Meet people where they are
- Consider whether an oral history is appropriate
- Remove any personal agendas you carry from the interview
- Understand why narrators and communities are choosing to collaborate with you so that your project can fulfill their intentions too

Landscapes of Memory: 2026 OHA Annual Meeting



Our memories are shaped by the landscapes we inhabit—both real and imagined. These landscapes are shifting in the face of environmental change, political instability, and an ongoing sense of crisis. Ancient connections with the natural world are being severed, and people are displaced not only from this innate connection to the earth but also from familiar ways of living and relating to one another. As oral historians, we witness narrators' struggles to imagine new identities within this changing ecology.

For the 2026 Oral History Association Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon, we have invited contributions from around the world — from those working in academia, advocacy, education, and community-based practice — that speak to how people shape and are shaped by the landscapes they inhabit, traverse, defend, or are forced to leave behind.

The Pacific Northwest offers a vivid backdrop for these conversations. Portland is where many Indian tribes collaborate on river and salmon habitat restoration. It is where Governor Tom McCall pioneered environmental laws that became a national model, and where artists, writers, and community organizers have long given voice to place, displacement, and environmental justice. The region's convergence of urban innovation, protected wilderness, and layered histories invites wide-ranging discussions about how oral histories illuminate ecological crises, stewardship, and resilience.

Registration is now availble as well as the preliminary program. Click the image above for more information.

Membership Committee Report and Recommendations for 2026 OHA Action Plan Survey

The Oral History Association's 2025 Action Plan Survey provided much useful information about the experiences of folks working in the field of oral history. A diverse subset of OHA members answered the survey with quantitative data, personal experiences, and their viewpoints about how to strengthen OHA's mission and service. Their responses gave critical insight into the current state of the field; their words shed light on how the OHA might strengthen the ongoing effort to support and grow our discipline.

The Membership Committee created an overview of important data and themes that emerged throughout the survey results. Below, you will find overall recommendations gleaned from the survey.

To those who participated in the 2025 Action Plan Survey, we thank you. If you did not take the survey last year, we heartily welcome your participation in the next survey!

Recommendations Regarding Action Plan Survey:

- Expand year-round virtual programming
  - We recommend prioritizing webinars on AI tools, grant writing, trauma-informed interviewing, and digital preservation.
- Develop intermediate and advanced programming tracks
  - Current offerings skew toward beginners; experienced members need and want more
- Create dedicated resources and programming for independent practitioners
  - This constituency is large, active, and underserved. While OHA has directed attention to this group in the past, more resources would be beneficial for independent practitioners.
- Clarify and publicize volunteer and committee pathways.
  - We recommend that OHA create a how-to guide or onboarding resource to address this frequently raised concern for newcomers or members interested in getting more involved.
- Consider a public advocacy statement on federal funding cuts.
  - Many members are looking to OHA for solidarity and leadership; this should be routed to the appropriate advocacy body
- Evaluate annual conference model.
  - Multiple respondents raised concerns about hotel quality, affordability, and accessibility; university campuses and hybrid access are recurring suggestions within the survey.
- Consider the Oral History Review's scope and accessibility.
  - Members want more community and public history content, avenues to share actual oral history interviews, and greater editorial diversity.

- Strengthen mentorship program visibility and accountability.
  - The program exists but is not well-known, and mentee follow-through is uneven.
  - Increase mentorship buy-in among mid-to-late career OHA members.
- Investigate representation gaps in survey respondents.
  - While the survey has 237 unique responses, the Membership committee wonders how representative this survey truly is.
  - International members, rural practitioners, and those without institutional affiliation may be underrepresented in this data.

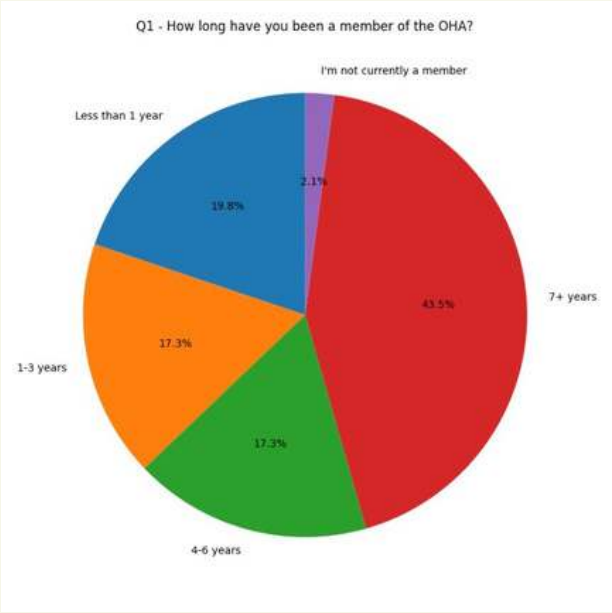
Survey Overview

The 2025 Action Plan Survey received 237 unique responses from an OHA membership of approximately 1,000 — a response rate of roughly 24%. While we reached our goal of 300 responses in the broader survey effort, the committee recommends that future iterations consider whether this sample is sufficiently representative of the full membership, particularly underrepresented groups such as international members, rural practitioners, and those without institutional affiliation.

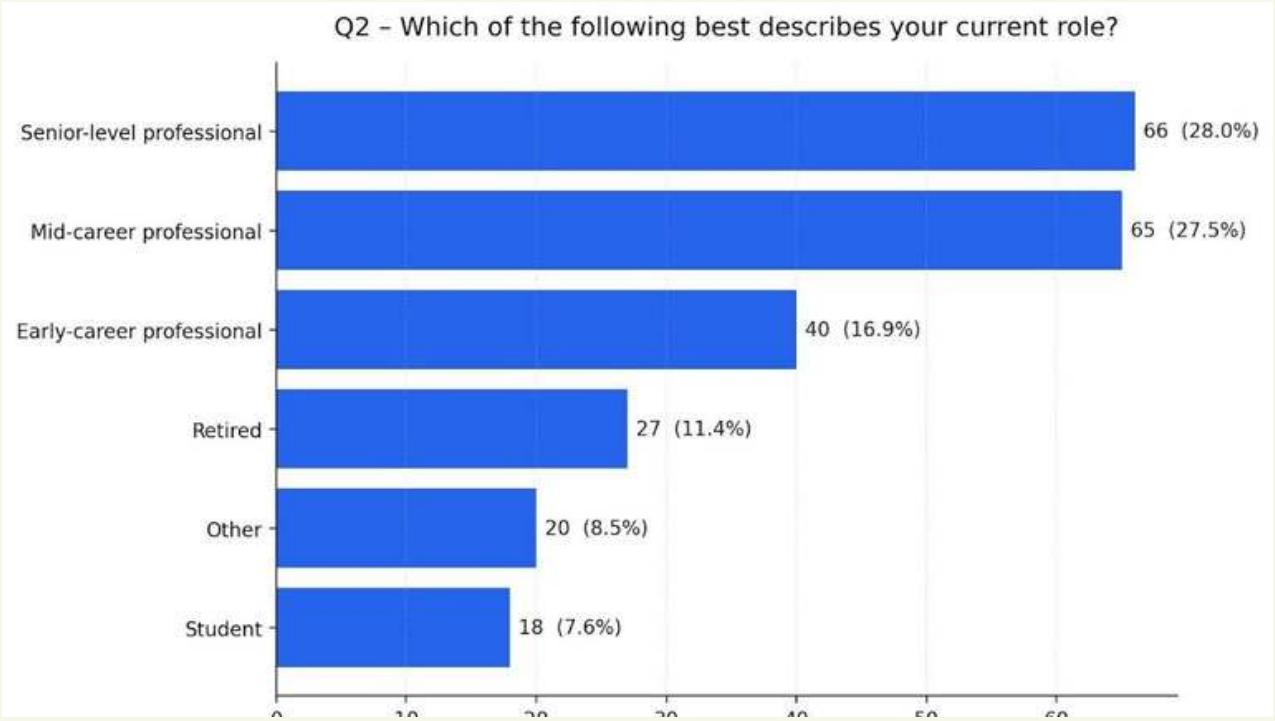
Approximately 98% of respondents are current OHA members, with 2% identifying as non-members, suggesting that the survey primarily captured existing member perspectives rather than lapsed or potential members.

Statistics Breakdown

Membership tenure:
- Less than 1 year: 47 (19.8%)
- 1–3 years: 41 (17.2%)
- 4–6 years: 41 (17.2%)
- 7+ years: 103 (43.5%)
- Not currently a member: 5 (2.1%)



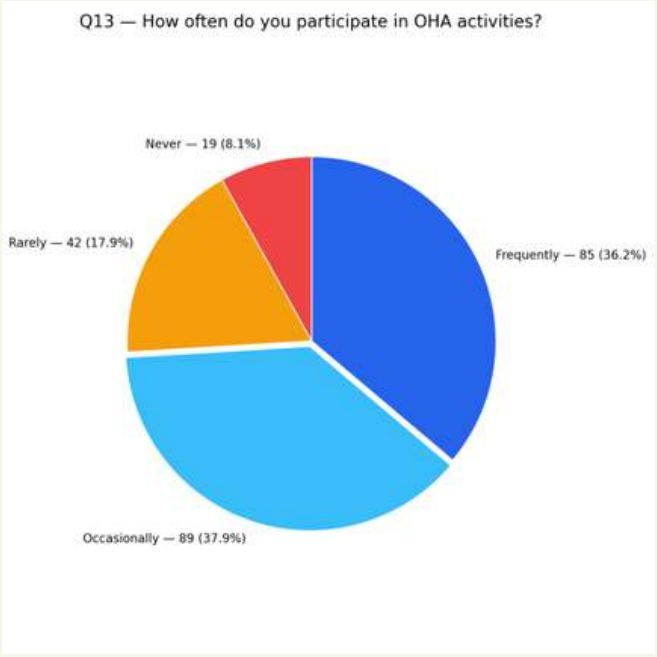
Mid- and senior-level professionals together represent 55% of respondents. Students and early-career professionals together represent only 24%, which the committee flags as a potential gap in emerging member representation and retention.



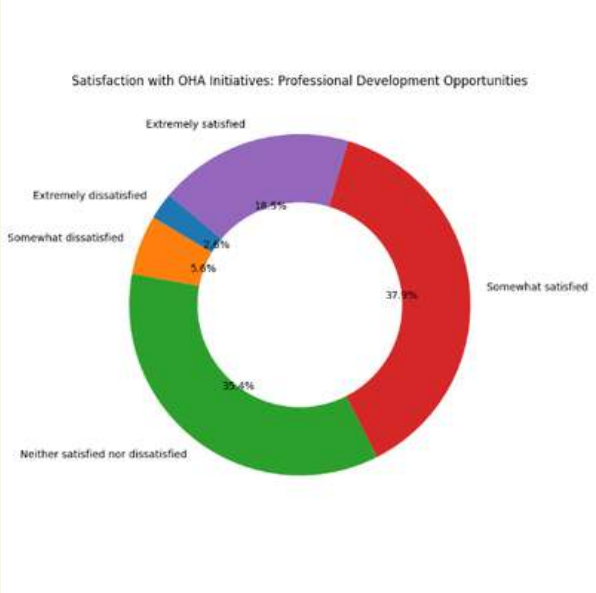
Roughly 74% of respondents engage with OHA at least occasionally, suggesting a generally active respondent pool. However, the 8% who never participate — and who still chose to respond — may represent an important voice about barriers to engagement worth investigating.

Participation frequency:

- Frequently: 85 (35.9%)
- Occasionally: 89 (37.6%)
- Rarely: 42 (17.7%)
- Never: 19 (8%)



Satisfaction Highlights

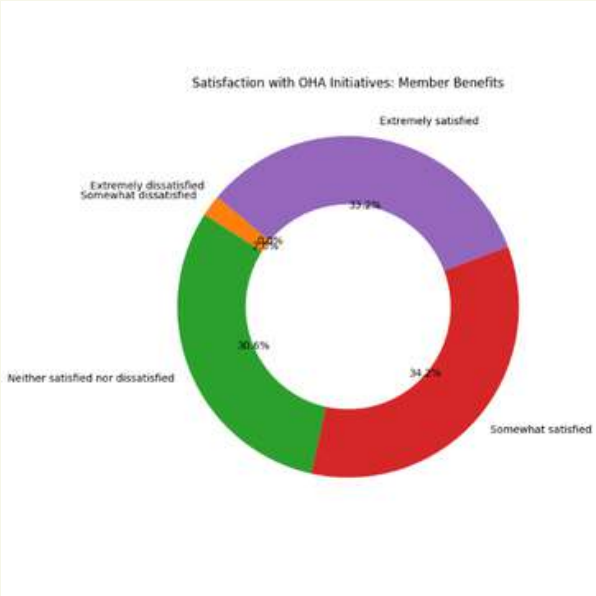


Professional development opportunities:
Extremely satisfied: 36 (15.1%)
Somewhat satisfied: 74 (31.2%)
Neutral: 69 (29.1%)
Somewhat dissatisfied: 11 (4.6%)
Extremely dissatisfied: 5 (2.1%)

The large neutral bloc (29%) is significant. Combined with open-ended feedback, this likely reflects members who are not dissatisfied but are not finding professional development offerings fully relevant to their needs — particularly intermediate and advanced practitioners, and those working outside academic institutions.

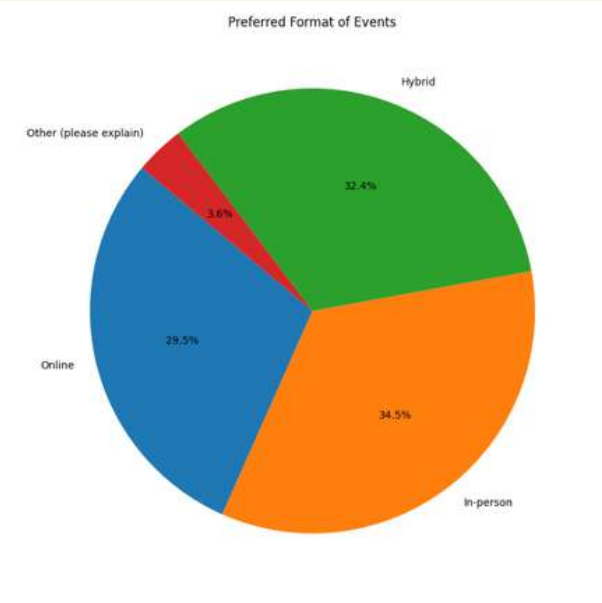
Oral history as interdisciplinary practice: Many respondents note that oral history represents only a portion of their professional work. This has implications for how OHA frames its programming and membership value. Offerings must be useful to members who are practitioners-in-part, not only full-time oral historians.

Member benefits show stronger satisfaction overall, with over 55% satisfied. The journal is a frequently cited positive. However, some members find the Oral History Review too academically oriented and call for more community- and public history-focused content.



Member benefits:
Extremely satisfied: 65 (27.4%)
Somewhat satisfied: 67 (28.3%)
Neutral: 60 (25.3%)
Somewhat dissatisfied: 4 (1.6%)

A strong majority prefer online or hybrid access, reinforcing the need for robust virtual programming year-round — not only at the annual conference.



Format preference:

- Online or hybrid: 148 (62.4%)
- In-person or hybrid: 51 (21.5%)

One in three respondents reports direct disruption from federal government actions, including canceled NEH, IMLS, NPS, and state humanities grants. An additional 22% are unsure or describe indirect impacts. This is one of the most urgent findings in the survey.

Federal funding impact:

- Yes: 78 (32.9%)
- No: 75 (31.6%)
- Unsure: 27 (11.4%)
- Other: 26 (11%)

Qualitative Takeaways

Respondents generally value and appreciate OHA and its offerings.vThey expressed their desires to interact and participate in programs, workshops, and volunteer opportunities.

What members value about OHA:

- The annual conference is consistently praised as welcoming, high-quality, and professionally energizing.
- Communication (newsletters, emails) is seen as clear, timely, and useful.
- OHA is described as unusually warm and collegial compared to peer organizations.
- The Baylor-based executive office receives strong praise for professionalism and accessibility.

What members want more of:

- Year-round programming — webinars, virtual symposia, and regional meetups beyond the annual conference.
- Request for Advanced and intermediate content — multiple experienced practitioners explicitly note that most offerings are geared toward beginners.

- Practical, skills-based training in: AI and transcription tools, digital preservation and storage, grant writing, equipment guidance, trauma-informed interviewing, and public engagement.
- More support for independent practitioners, who are a large and underserved constituency .
- Clearer pathways to volunteer, join committees, and take on leadership roles. Many members express a desire to be more involved but don't know how to access these essential volunteer opportunities.

Challenges, Missed Opportunities, and Requests

- Practical assistance navigating the field, especially in this tumultuous time navigating political upheaval, ICE raids, and federal funding cuts.
- Federal funding crisis: Canceled and frozen grants (NEH, IMLS, NPS, state humanities councils) are threatening projects, organizations, and careers.
- Narrator safety and trust: Members describe a worsening climate for interviewing, particularly with immigrant communities, people of color, and federally employed narrators.
- Isolation: Many members– especially those at small institutions or working independently– describe working alone with few regional peers.
- Digital storage costs: Growing video collections and rising storage costs are a persistent and practical burden.
- AI disruption: Members report AI is compressing timelines, raising ethical questions, and creating new risks around narrator privacy.
- Career pipeline: Few stable, well-compensated oral history positions exist, particularly for early-career and independent practitioners.

ORAL HISTORY REVIEW UPDATES

By Holly Werner-Thomas

Indigenous scholar Sara Sinclair is Guest Editor of the *Oral History Review's* Special Issue on Indigenous Oral History this fall. As Sara writes in her Guest Editor column: "The essays and reflections gathered here represent a multiplicity of voices from the breadth and depth of Indigenous oral history as it is practiced today, across geographies, epistemologies, communities, and nations." Published articles and reviews will begin to appear online this month and the print issue is due out in September. Copies will also be available at the OHA conference in October. We expect that it will become a collectors' item with practitioners returning to the rich variety of scholarship for years to come.

Our fall issue also coincides with the OHA conference in Portland, Oregon, where journal editors plan on having a strong presence, not least our Roundtable, scheduled for Friday, October 16 at 1:00 PM, "The *Oral History Review*: Get Involved, Get Published!" – so mark your calendars and join us for a presentation and discussion. Also stay tuned for more *OHR*-related events.

In the meantime, please make sure to visit our online publication, Extra!, where we are currently featuring author interviews with Douglas A. Boyd, Eleanor Paynter, and Lynn Lewis (all of whose research articles feature in our spring 2026 issue, which includes a Special Section dedicated to Oral History and AI), plus a guest post on The Derek Piotr Fieldwork Archive.

NOTE: The *Oral History Review* is currently receiving applications for a new Managing Editor for the 2027-2029 contract period. More details on that search are available here.

And finally, the *Review* is also always seeking reviewers. If you are interested in peer reviewing for us – a vital way to contribute to the journal – please reach out to me at holly@hollythomasoralhistory.com or to our Managing Editor, Molly Todd, at managingeditorohr@gmail.com. For book and media review inquiries, please contact our Book Review Editor, Jacey Anderson, at ohrbookrevieweditor@gmail.com, and our Media Review Editor, Bud Kliment, at OHRMedia@outlook.com.

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