

# MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

## Why Oral History?

STEVEN ANDERSON

“Why Oral History?” was the title of a short paper by Harold K. Steen and Susan Schrepfer on the occasion of the Forest History Society’s twenty-fifth anniversary in 1972. That issue of the Society’s journal *Forest History* highlighted eleven memoirs produced by the Society that were generously supported by the Louis W. and Maud Hill Family Foundation, the Weyerhaeuser Family Foundation, and the U.S. Forest Service. Since then, excerpts from many other oral histories have graced both our journal and magazine and several have been converted into book form.

From its beginning, the Society considered the collection of oral histories as one of the most important strategies to supplement its efforts to “gather and preserve archival records relating to conservation, forestry, and lumbering.” The first interviews conducted by the Society in the late 1940s were taken by written notes. When the Society’s first tape-recorded interview was conducted in 1953, we joined with other pioneers in “verbatim capture of the subject’s personality, speech mannerisms, and knowledge.” FHS contributed to developing the standard oral history protocol at the time such interviews were beginning to be accepted by the academic community as a valid augmentation of the historical record.

To be most useful, oral histories must meet scholarly criteria. Interviews concerning events long since past demand especially stringent standards that use forms of internal questioning and comparison with different oral accounts as cross-checks. “Historians have long utilized with discretion autobiographies written after the fact, as well as diaries and journals.” Acknowledging the potential weaknesses of oral histories is also important. Memories can fail, perceptions can change and distort. But an experienced interviewer applying appropriate safeguards will maximize the scholarly value of an oral history interview.

Yet, we must also recognize that if interviews wait until funding is available to conduct the most professional of interviews, many opportunities will simply be gone. When a person dies, a library is lost. That is why the Forest History Society has conducted training sessions and assisted local groups to conduct their own interviews. We need everyone in the forest, conservation, and scientific communities to be involved and support such efforts. Technology has made such interviews even more valuable as the quality of both audio and video available to the common organization and family has increased tremendously.

The value of oral histories is not limited to scholarly background. Such documents can bring to light facts that other-



wise would be lost to history, they can give status to those who history has left out, and they can be used to affect public opinion and inform public policy. For example, on May 26, 1976, Senator Lee Metcalf remarked that the Senate would soon be taking up the proposed National Forest Management Act. To shed light on the issues of forest management, wilderness preservation, and the timber industry that the act would in part address, he quoted portions of the “Interview with the Former Chief of the Forest Service” conducted with Richard McArdle just published by the Forest History Society directly into the *Congressional Record*. He also had printed

into the *Record* a letter from McArdle to the Forest History Society that clarified the role of Senator Hubert Humphrey in passing the Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act of 1960.

In 1972, the Forest History Society reported it had interviewed more than 170 people, producing some 600 hours of tape. As of today, the Society has interviewed over 300 people and has more than 1,200 hours of tape, and has assisted in the transcriptions of interviews for a variety of efforts. For a list of interviews, visit our website at [www.foresthistory.org/Research/ohiguide.html](http://www.foresthistory.org/Research/ohiguide.html).

All of the Society’s oral histories originally conducted on reel-to-reel and even stenorette tapes have been copied to cassette tapes, the archival standard. We have also determined the cost to convert these interviews into electronic files. While transferring tapes to digital files allows us to keep pace with technology from an archival point of view, it also provides the greater opportunity to make the voices and stories available through the Internet. Much greater access and use of the interviews is to be expected.

These efforts have been very positive and productive, but the Forest History Society’s vision includes much more. In order to preserve the voices and stories of public, private, and corporate pioneers before they are lost forever, the Society has made the creation of the Oral History Center a priority in its *Stories of the Forest* campaign. The Society is already the nexus for such efforts throughout North America and this effort will formalize funding for it. It will support an Oral Historian position that will, for the first time, establish a national advisory committee, pursue those interviews of the highest priority, and expand the Society’s ability to help other programs be established.

This priority is supported by the Society’s strategic plan and the Society’s belief that “preservation of records of historical significance, and maintaining their quality and integrity to serve present and future generations” is a critical endeavor. □