

The ASIS&T Oral History Program: An Interim Report

by Robert V. Williams

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

As part of the 75th anniversary celebration of ASIS&T, an oral history program was started to document the background, significant events and careers of outstanding individuals in information science and technology. The ongoing project takes a cue from oral histories of the Medical Library Association and the Chemical Heritage Foundation and captures individuals' experiences and decisions in their personal and professional lives, reflecting the development of the association itself. With seed funding from the ASIS&T SIG Special Projects Fund and help from graduate classes and Special Interest Group/History and the Foundations of Information Science, the initiative has relied on volunteers to identify and visit with interviewees and to record, transcribe and prepare materials for deposit in the ASIS&T archives at the University of Michigan Library. Interviews illustrate the leaps in telecommunications influencing personal careers and helping the Association in its early years, the expansion of centers for information retrieval science, bureaucratic challenges and the interplay of personalities. The ASIS&T oral history project is an important documentation of the growth of the field, capturing recordings, photos and biographies of key contributors.

KEYWORDS

Association for Information Science and Technology
information science history
oral history
information scientists

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The ASIS&T oral history program began in 2011 during preparations for the 75th anniversary celebration of the Association for Information Science and Technology, which was held at the 2012 Annual Meeting. The 75th Anniversary Committee, chaired by Toni Carbo and Bob Williams, oversaw the program. The basic idea for the program was to select an initial group of ASIS&T leaders that had not been documented in an earlier oral history project. This list, selected by the 75th Anniversary Committee, initially consisted of about 50 people and was then roughly prioritized by the ages of the leaders on our list. In the selection process strong consideration was given to former Award of Merit and Research Award winners. A deliberate effort was made to make the program truly international. Michel Menou, a longtime ASIS&T member based in France, formed a small group in Europe to conduct interviews there. A small subset of the initial 75th Anniversary Committee, consisting of Kathryn La Barre, Trudi Hahn, Toni Carbo, Lai Ma and Bob Williams, continues to oversee the program. SIG/HFIS (History and Foundations of Information Science) members have also been of invaluable help.

No funding for this program was provided by ASIS&T, but a grant proposal was submitted to the Institute for Museum and Library Services. It was not successful, so the 75th Anniversary Committee decided that we would have to rely on the work of the committee and volunteers. Later, in 2013 and 2014, the ASIS&T SIG Special Projects fund provided two \$5,000 grants for interview transcription and preparation of a website to display the interviews. Samantha Hastings, director of the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina, has provided several graduate assistants to help with background research and transcription. Oral history is a very expensive process, requiring background research on the individuals to be interviewed; equipment; travel expenses for the interviewers;

transcription costs; editing of the transcript; final completion of the transcript and the video or audio recording and preparation for deposit in the ASIS&T archives at the University of Michigan Library.

Why Do Oral History?

The major purpose of an oral history interview is to document the undocumented and under-documented events, background and decisions relevant to the individual being interviewed. Thus, considerable background research has to be conducted on what the individual did in his or her career. This profile includes but is not limited to the identification of important turning points in the personal and professional life of the interviewee. These experiences, decisions, major intellectual contributions, work history and so forth need to be documented by the interview if they have not been documented in some other form, such as the interviewee's CV/vita or his or her own writings. Since one of our major purposes was also to document the development of ASIS&T over the years, it was necessary to go beyond such things as ASIS&T board minutes or other Association official documents.

Oral historians in all fields have several problems that affect their work. The first has to do with funding. In our case money has been a large problem, and we must depend mostly on volunteers who donate their time and travel expenses. The second problem is deciding the kind of interview to do. The two major choices are either short, basic-facts-and-career-assessments by the interviewees or longer life-career interviews with specific attention to issues and decisions the interviewees have been involved in over their careers. Our oral history program is a mix of the two types. The third problem of oral history interviews is to get the interviewees to talk freely about the problems, issues, disappointments and successes of their careers, particularly those that are not documented. We have carefully guaranteed every interviewee complete confidentiality, including giving the interviewee control over all access to the interview for a period he or she specifies. However, sometimes this measure still does not completely alleviate the fears or reluctance of the interviewees, and they do not tell it all as is preferred. Below, for a little flavor, are just a few excerpts from some of our interviews, reproduced by permission of the interviewees.

Margie Hlava on early online searching (p. 14 of transcript):

Hlava: Well, no, they didn't have a CRT, that came along shortly thereafter, but they had thermal paper and they did have a keyboard, then the next advent after was to make the connection easier. We would do it with an acoustic coupler and from Albuquerque, we had a phone on Telnet to Phoenix, and because there's a mountain range in the way, the connection didn't always work. We went from 15 to 300 baud and then eventually 1200 baud, which was like lightning fast! It was still really expensive because we were charged per connect minute.

Michael Buckland on his decision to be a librarian (p. 20 of transcript):

Buckland: So I applied to University College London and I applied to Sheffield, which hadn't yet opened. I interviewed at London, and I probably didn't interview very well, because they told me to my face that they didn't think I could handle their course...I've reminded them off and on once or twice since... [laughter]. Sheffield said, "Come." So that's how I decided to go to Sheffield. I was one of the first intake of students. There were, as I recall, 22 students, 21, 23, something like that, in the first class admitted. There were four faculty, none of whom had been faculty before. And this was a great advantage, because it meant that first year that if anything went wrong – with only the four faculty... it might have been their fault. In subsequent years they didn't think that.

Ingetraut Dahlberg on the contributions made by information science (p. 2 of transcript):

What do you consider as the most significant achievement of information science?

Dahlberg: First of all, the creation of thesauri, even faceted ones, and their later standardization. Then the development of computerized information retrieval beginning in 1964. The acknowledgement of necessary relationships in phrasing statements about contents of documents (links and roles, EJC - Thesaurus and similar work at Case Western), work toward mapping and compatibility of indexing languages, today called interoperability; the ambition toward creating ontologies of non-scientific concepts; the attempt to create a Semantic Web and all the present work in this regard of linking data.

Stephen Robertson on early information retrieval work (p. 11 of transcript):

Robertson: Well, I need to describe one of the features of the information retrieval scene in UK. I should say that UK was one of the major centers for information retrieval – there was some in the States, quite a lot in the UK, some in France, but very little anywhere else in the world at all. Anyway, the information scene in the UK had the Cranfield project going on – Cleverdon who ran the Cranfield project was regarded as a sort of world authority on this kind of thing – he got involved in the MEDLARS evaluation in '67 or so, over in the States as well. He was a librarian at Cranfield, what is now Cranfield University, but was then the Cranfield College of Aeronautics, a very specialist college. He had this very specialized library collection, and that's what he used for the Cranfield project. But he was quite a forceful character, he had very strong ideas, on various things. Jason Farradane, who was the leader of the city course, was also a very strong-minded character, with strong ideas of his own. For some reason these two, Farradane and Cleverdon, did not get on at all. Not at all. They almost hated each other, not quite hate, but professionally they each regarded what the other said as completely bad and hopeless, and at public meetings they'd get up and say so. If one of them was giving a talk, the other would be sitting in the audience just itching to jump up and tell him why he was wrong. There was quite a lot of this.

Michel Menou on work with FAO and AGRIS (p. 5 of transcript):

Menou: These four years were exciting. I was spending roughly half of my time in the field and the other half in Rome. Within the unit, which was an informal arrangement within the division, I had only one administrative assistant and one part-time secretary, a wonderful one fortunately. So it was really hard work. The position did not, however, allow for the kind of continuing support of local efforts I had dreamed of. Bureaucratic constraints and the workload left little room for initiatives. Towards the end of my contract there was once again one of these episodic financial crises in the organization. I only had to take note that the eventual renewal of my contract had not been notified within the specified delay. In fact I had more than enough. I needed fresh air.

Bonnie Carroll on being president of ASIS&T (1985) (p. 15 of transcript):

Carroll: Well, one of the very interesting things in that time, the concept of email was just beginning. And at the time, there was something... I'm trying to remember, the New Jersey Institute of Technology had something called the [Planet?] system, and they allowed ASIS&T to use that. It was an email system. And there was another one, I don't know whether it was through ARPA, I'm not remembering... There was another system that was only used mainly by universities, but I actually used the [Planet?] system to communicate with the executive committee of ASIS&T. And it was the first time I, and most people, had ever really used email, and that's when I got my first exposure of send once to many, and that kind of thing. Well, it was an experiment. And there was no particular continuity after the year that we did it, but it really left... quite an impression on me trying to do that. There was also a lot of change going on in terms of the executive director, you know, ASIS&T's history, about that time, but... Well, certainly I hope I did a good job and had an impact on ASIS&T. I remember believing very definitely that the president of ASIS&T should have a kind of a platform and some goals and things like that. It was a time of change, the 1980s, and we looked at the challenges, and I remember an article in the *Bulletin*, about the challenges....

A Brief History of IST Oral History Work

While the present ASIS&T oral history work will likely be the largest program of interviewing leaders of information science and technology (IST) by the time we complete the current phase of our work (estimated to be 2016), it is not the oldest program in our field. Considerably older is the work done by several universities to record the memories of retiring faculty at their institutions. Exactly how many of these interviews have been done is difficult to know because it requires knowledge of the individual interviewees and the institutions they worked for. Most can be located by searching the online library catalog at a specific institution. A good example is one with Patrick Wilson, University of California, Berkeley, and a well-known leader in our field. A different approach is displayed in the interview conducted by the National Council of Jewish Women, Pittsburgh Section, of

Allen Kent, which interviewed him about his Jewish heritage but included many aspects of his career in information science. (See his IS pioneers page for more details at <http://faculty.libsci.sc.edu/bob/ISP/kent.htm>.) I have attempted to find as many of these oral histories as I can locate, and they are on a preliminary list that will be displayed on our ASIS&T oral history site (see below for details).

Two other oral history programs, not limited to IST but including many IST leaders, have been going on for at least 20 years and have done great work documenting our field. The first is the Medical Library Association's oral history project, which has completed well over 50 interviews and is ongoing. Details are at www.mlanet.org/about/history/oral-history-project. The second program is the Chemical Heritage Foundation's oral history project, funded in part by the Garfield Foundation, which has completed approximately 22 interviews of IST leaders and pioneers. That program is a superb example of how to do oral history well. Details are at www.chemheritage.org/discover/collections/oral-histories/index.aspx. Search using the term *information science*. In general, most interviews are open for access, and transcripts may be ordered for a small fee. A good feature of this program is that each interview has been indexed by personal names and subjects covered.

The ASIS&T Oral History Program: Current Status

As of September 2014 we have conducted and made 15 interviews available on our new ASIS&T oral history web portal (located at <http://infoscileaders.libsci.sc.edu/>). This site was first developed as a class project in a course at the University of South Carolina, School of Library and Information Science taught by assistant professor Elise Lewis during fall term, 2013. It was further developed and enhanced by students in a spring 2014 course on digital libraries taught by Karen Miller, a doctoral student at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Lewis made a wise and fortuitous decision when developing the course to use the Wordpress software for constructing the site. The site currently contains information related to the interviews of the following people: Marcia Bates, Michael Buckland, Bonnie Carroll, Ingetraut Dahlberg, Ruggero Gilyarevsky,

Marjorie Hlava, Peter Ingwersen, Yves-Francois LeCoadic, Michel Menou, Francis L. Miksa, Charles Oppenheim, Stephen Robertson, Henry Small, Jacques Tocatlian and Thomas D. Wilson.

Every interview posted includes the following: one or more photos of the individual, interview transcript in whole or part (as controlled by the interviewee), CV (which usually contains a good bibliography of major writings), audio/video of the interview (if released by the interviewee), copyright/release statement indicating allowable use of the interview records. Eventually, all materials related to each interview and the work of the project will go into the ASIS&T archives at the University of Michigan Library.

In addition we have another five interviews in process (transcription or approval of transcript by interviewee). We also have a list of desired interviews (mostly waiting on volunteer interviewers) containing 17 names. Most of these individuals are located in the United States, but several are in Europe.

The ASIS&T Oral History Program: Future Plans/Hopes

At a recent meeting, the ASIS&T Board of Directors named a new contractor to manage the ASIS&T website. Seven Heads Design (www.sevenheadsdesign.com/) was selected and will use Wordpress for all aspects of the new site. Wordpress is primarily a blogging software but is very flexible for many different purposes. The oral history site will be integrated into a larger body of historical information about ASIS&T and information science worldwide. This body includes the historic ASIS&T photo archive developed by Trudi Hahn, the Information Science Digital Theatre developed by Bob Williams, the Pioneers of Information Science pages and links to some of the major conferences on the history of IST.

With the help of ASIS&T, particularly SIG/HFIS, and the IS community worldwide we hope to continue adding oral history interviews and other historical information to this site. We particularly want to include more oral histories of women and of people outside the United States in this next phase, which is still in the planning process. In order to do this project we need the help of our chapters, SIGs and individual members. Please join us in this work. ■