



LIVING HISTORY

Recording and preserving Northern Territory history has been the cause of a range of people working around Australia for the past 25 years, reports Diana Giese

How do you find out about the economy of Victoria River Downs? About Pine Creek Chinatown? Surviving a bombing raid? Tracking a fleeing criminal? Setting up local government? Facing the eye of a cyclone? Self-told stories in the oral history collections of the Northern Territory Archives offer powerful insights into all these—and much more.

An organised push to record and preserve Territory history began in the late 1970s. It was propelled by the compelling need,

in those early days of self-government, to define identity and capture the flavour of history in the making, as well as a past that otherwise would have been lost. Initiatives were set up under the first chief minister, Paul Everingham. They were powered by librarians, archivists, educators, administrators and local historians, who brought rich and diverse on-the-ground experiences to an urgent challenge. Outback identity and ex-mayor of Darwin, Tiger Brennan, had recently died, and many of his racy stories of pioneering the north died with him. He left no personal papers. And he was only one among many.

Helen Wilson became the first full-time executive officer of the Territory's History Unit, chaired by H.C. Giese. The Unit aimed at glimpsing the sweep of northern development, the big picture, through history work which mapped what

Mowarra Gunumbarr Recording Oral History at Rorru, an Outstation on the Shores of Arnhem Bay
Courtesy of Northern Territory Archives Service

was needed. Early oral history interviewees included Chinese Australian matriarch Lily Ah Toy, ex-Director of Lands in the Northern Territory Administration, Hugh Barclay, and businessman Ray Bardon. Interviewers with long local experience, such as Katherine's Hilda Tuxworth, were employed. IBM golfball typewriters were distributed among transcribers. Around 40 interviewers were employed around the country to locate and speak with people who had left the Territory. In Western Australia, Ronda Jamieson at the Battye Library was instrumental in finding and interviewing key ex-Territorians. In July 1978, the Oral History Association of Australia held its first meeting in Western Australia, with historian Peter Spillett as the first Territorian member.

Some 450 interviews were recorded in those early years. They included 'hour-by-hour' eyewitness accounts of World War II bombing raids. A program of taping key public figures such as the Administrator, and political and business leaders, was begun. After two years in the job, Helen Wilson spoke of how important it was to record 'some of the private thoughts and feelings of the various protagonists ... for long-term use', since 'what happens in the first five years [of self-government] will undoubtedly set the pattern for the future development of the Territory'. Equally important was acknowledgement of the multicultural character of the area. When the first members of the large Greek population came to the Top End just before World War I, the first generation of Australian-born Chinese were marrying, she said. She also noted that Germans and Italians were among those running their own clubs in Darwin, and that Finnish New Year and Ramadan were both observed.

Wilson also saw the intimate interconnection between interviewees, sometimes over a period of 50 years. There was an attendant reluctance to speak ill of anyone, or to rattle skeletons in cupboards. 'They know each other so well—and now the interviewers are also part of the same community', she said. A different view was taken of people newly arrived in the Territory to gather material for 'history' books. Territorians gleefully noted the tall stories solemnly written down as 'the truth'.

The oral history initiative was hosted in various departments of the Northern Territory Administration. Tapes were stored at the local

headquarters of the Australian Archives in a Darwin suburb. One 'unexpected bonus' of the interstate program was 'the recovery of a marvellous wealth of photographic and other documentary material'.

In 1984, the project was taken over by the Northern Territory Archives. Tapes and transcripts were transferred in bulk to air-conditioned headquarters in McMinn St in the Darwin CBD. Don Brech, an English archivist with experience at the Imperial War Museum in London, took charge. While cataloguing existing interviews and defining future directions, relationships were maintained with those working in the field, including those interstate.

In 1985, Francis Good joined the Archives with a background in managing research projects and current affairs radio interviewing. Over the succeeding years, his work and what he has facilitated, have become synonymous with oral history in the Northern Territory. There are now over 2000 hours of recordings.

As well as 'the desperate struggle to record people before they die, in *ad hoc* life history interviews', he saw the need for bigger thematic projects. He involved the Archives in all stages of the oral history process, from first phone call to final transcript. In his early years, he travelled widely both within the Territory and interstate, listening to what people thought was important.

This was the Territory that had rebuilt its capital after the 1974 devastation of cyclone Tracy. People were now over the first trauma of remaking their lives following the cyclone, and were ready to talk for the historical record. Good advertised, and 'sent out the word'. Half a dozen people met to discuss the shape which a project centred on the

Killing, Cutting and Dressing Meat at Victoria River Downs
Roden Collection, item no 21
Courtesy of Northern Territory Archives Service





above:
Bombed Flats
 Evelyn Glassenbury Collection
 Courtesy of Northern Territory Archives
 Service

below:
Tiger Brennan (right)
 Anna Collins Collection
 Courtesy of Northern Territory Archives
 Service

cyclone might take. Focus points were noted on index cards, so that each interviewer would give a roughly similar framework to their questioning. These explored interviewees' backgrounds, and the sort of accommodation in which they were living when Tracy struck. What had they known about cyclones before that cataclysmic Christmas Eve? What was it like experiencing those hours and hours of darkness, driving rain and terrifying howling wind as the town was destroyed around them? At first light, what had they seen? How did they feel as they began to realise what had happened to their lives?

Post-cyclone events were also discussed on the tapes. Attending to injuries,

evacuation and cleaning up the shattered town are all discussed by those who vividly remember the horror. The final stages of the interviews explore the long-term effects on the survivors: what they feel as winds begin to gather at Christmas, how their attitudes to the worth of possessions, family, and security have changed.

Cyclone Tracy has become a running theme not only of these interviews, but of many others since recorded by the Archives. After all, surviving disaster is something of a *leitmotif* of Top End history. There were several doom-laden attempts to establish the settlement that has grown into Darwin. Many dreams of agricultural and industrial wealth have come to nothing, leaving huge debts. The bombing raids of World War II, and attendant mass evacuation, devastated the Top End. Francis Good has recorded or facilitated many memories of survival: the Katherine floods, wars and drought.

One practical way in which a cyclone theme (or any other) can be followed through different interviews is by using ISYS text search and retrieval software. This searches for strings of characters, themes, places and people, through which it is possible to enter the transcripts. Good regards opening up the interviews to researchers in this way as one of his major contributions to the Archives. 'Fairly early on it became apparent we needed summaries and content listings for all interviews, and that these should be able to be searched by computer. We also needed a computer-based database for management and archiving purposes,' he says. He wrote the program for the latter himself, and it's still in use.

Specialist areas for the Archives include a cluster of interviews and much documentary material on the pastoral industry, and a continuing interest in recording in Aboriginal communities. Since Good was approached for assistance as 'the Oral History Man' at the 1986 Barunga Festival, he has facilitated work by Aboriginal people themselves in communities throughout the Territory. Through such people as teachers and art workers, he has developed contacts in places such as Yuendumu and Ngukurr. In the latter, a group of women went on to receive an AIATSIS grant to record and preserve their stories. He feels this kind of enabling work strongly influenced the theme of the 1997



Oral History Association of Australia Conference, 'Crossing Borders', which he and Beth Robertson co-convened in Alice Springs. 'After initial assistance we can step back and allow Aboriginal people themselves to drive the work!'

Many people both inside and outside the profession see making oral history interviews available through the Internet—thus moving them further into the public domain—as the next logical step. Francis Good, however, is among practitioners who strike a cautionary note.

Even now, he says, there are those who don't fully grasp the difference between the 'raw record' that is the oral history recording and its verbatim transcript, and the products of interviews. 'Just as television, radio and print interviews are highly-produced artefacts, so is an extract on the Internet,' he says. This means that those who are not familiar with oral history are often daunted or disappointed when faced with 'raw' oral history. Few have the skills or the stamina to contend with a discursive, often rambling story recorded over several hours. Professional oral historians often take the next step, and become mediators, extracting and using core material to advantage in CDs, articles, books, radio programs or other products.

'Riding the pack of wild horses called digital audio technology' is another challenge for the future, Good believes. Digital output, which can readily be manipulated and perfectly copied, is greatly prized by users such as researchers and museum curators. The NT Archives now owns three state-of-the-art DAT recorders and associated low-hiss, high-output microphones. Good passes on his technical and management skills to others in regular workshops and training sessions, and lends equipment to outside projects. He then offers them free transcription and the safe-keeping of the Archives. With smaller oral history projects around the country, 'it all comes down to money in the end' as to whether they are able to take the digital high-road.



Over the years, a community of historians, librarians and archivists has grown up, working together to collect and give access to our Australian stories. Cathy Flint, who works at the Archives to facilitate research, notes the interesting range of people who make use of oral history—'a great complement to the official record of reports, papers and photos'. She has also noticed that sound tapes offer 'a really powerful tool' for family historians seeking members who have since died. Historical and community projects in which oral history is a major component can be facilitated by borrowing equipment, and transcription agreements such as Francis Good's are especially helpful to a time-poor researcher. Properly funded initiatives to establish oral history centres in universities, to pass on project management, interviewing and transcription skills, would further assist joint work. They would also take some of the pressure off current centres of excellence such as the National Library of Australia and the few state libraries that have managed to keep oral history programs going through lean times.

DIANA GIESE has coordinated oral history projects country-wide for over a decade. These projects have produced archives, radio programs, videos, CDs and CD-ROMs, exhibitions, and books including *Astronauts, Lost Souls and Dragons* (University of Queensland Press, 1997)

Cyclone Tracy Damage
Hylton Luke Collection
Courtesy of Northern Territory Archives Service