



MERCY OUTREACH

**The Listening Word:
Oral Archive Experience -
Purpose, Planning, Process**

*The Experience of the
Congregation of the Sisters of
Mercy (Ireland)*

1. INTRODUCTION

ORAL ARCHIVES: THE PROJECT

- What is oral history?
- Status
- Purpose
- Establishing an Oral Archive
- Planning

2. Oral Archives: The Process

- The Interview
- Preparation for the Interviews
- Post interview activity

3. Oral Archives: Outcomes

- Preservation and Storage
- Some legal and ethical issues
- Availability and outreach

INTRODUCTION

What is oral history?

➤ *"Verbatim Accounts or opinions of persons who are or who were witnesses to, or participants in, events likely to be of interest to future scholars."*

(Moss, William, Oral History Program Manual, Praeger, New York, 1974, p.7)

What is oral history? (Cont'd.)

- *"The systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences."*
- A process and a product.

INTRODUCTION

Status as a valid historical resource for researchers?

- Regarded as a well established and important historical discipline.
- Research scholars have campaigned for this recognition.

INTRODUCTION

Status (Cont'd.)

- Most universities, research and academic institutions as well as reputable libraries now have oral archive departments.
- British Library Sound Archive.

INTRODUCTION

Limitations

- Memory not always reliable – can play tricks and distort the truth.
- People forget and can confuse events.
- Painful memories can be suppressed.
- Over influence of interviewer.

INTRODUCTION

Strengths

- Egalitarian – documents the lives of sisters from all levels of the congregation
- Not limited to superiors, Provincials, famous or influential.
- Affirmation for sisters.

INTRODUCTION

Strengths (Cont'd.)

- Ability to capture experiences and emotions.
- Preserves voices, dialect and turns of phrase.
- Adds colour and dimension to a recorded fact.



Sister Immaculata 1957



Sister Immaculata and the Hungarian children 1957



Sister Immaculata 2009

ORAL ARCHIVES: THE PROJECT

PURPOSE

- Adds this new kind of evidence of oral history to the written history of the Congregation.
- Allows sisters to speak for themselves, tell why they entered religious life, why they came to Mercy, and their experiences during the years of radical change.

ORAL ARCHIVES: THE PROJECT

PURPOSE (Cont'd.)

- Provides an opportunity to record primary witnesses to those changes that have occurred within Mercy during the latter half of the 20th cent.
- History of Mercy parallels the history of cities, towns and villages in which Sisters of Mercy have ministered.

ORAL ARCHIVES: THE PROJECT

Establishing the project

- Reconfiguring of congregation in 1994
- Congregational Archivist appointed 1996
- Oral Archive Project initiated in 1997
- Put in abeyance due to increased workload

ORAL ARCHIVES: THE PROJECT

Establishing the project (Cont'd.)

- Relaunched in 2002 at provincial level
- Volunteers sought for oral archive work – part time
- Oral archive committee established

Oral Archives: The Project

Planning:

➤ Objectives

(a) *To collect and record as many life stories as possible from the ordinary members of the province as well as from leaders and prominent members.*

(b) *To conduct both autobiographical and topical interviews*

Oral Archives – The Project

- Drew up a mission statement

"Agallamh is an oral archive project that seeks to conserve for posterity the Mercy Story as experienced by individual sisters."

- Sought advice from experts
- Had a training day

Oral Archives: The Project

Planning:

1. Goal

Revisited our goal to add the evidence of oral history to the written history of the congregation.

Oral Archives – The Project

Planning (cont'd)

2. Interviewers?
3. Interviewees?
4. Transcribers
5. Ownership issue
6. Evaluation
7. Where to deposit tapes?

Oral Archives – The Project

Further planning needed re:

- Training and adequate time for practice
- Proper setting for interviews
- Ownership issue
- How to process tapes and transcripts
- Budget

Oral Archives – The Product

- Autobiographies of the Sisters
 - Sisters living alone
 - Ministries
 - Education
 - Health Care
 - Missions
 - Prayer Movements
 - Adoption Work
 - Work with Travellers
 - Work with Immigrants
 - Group Interviews
 - Day Care Centres
 - Work with laity - Associates





The question was are we going to go on forever with separate schools. The approach was to say that we would just bring in the children bit by bit and have an established sort of thing by the time people would wake up to it. ...



South African School During Apartheid



Soweto Riots 1976

We put such a proposal to the Bishop's Conference. We tried to get the Brothers to come with us, but the Brothers were a bit hesitant...men are very legally minded, women are more the kind to say let's do it and see what happens, but the men said....let's work to change the law and then by all means we will take them....

It was brought to the Bishop's Conference in 1976 and the proposal was accepted...The beginnings were very small. We began to take in the children....Then quite soon the department began to question and send people to inspect. Some of the inspectors were more friendly than others....others were totally horrified. They would say it was on a matter of culture. This was always their story.



Mercy School, Soweto

Then the state began to threaten and say the schools would be deregistered. Our school in Craighall was one of them....It appeared on the television. ...That gave parents quite a fright and made them a bit angry. They began saying you did this without telling us....We could say to them, if we had told you would you have said yes we will come with you. It was more a question of we had to create the opportunity and then invite you to come along with it. That I do think was the best plan.



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