

**Flight 93 Oral History Project Presentation
By Charlie Fox, Somerset Historical Center
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Under the auspices of a one year grant from the National Park Service, the Historical & Genealogical Society of Somerset County has agreed to undertake an oral history project to document the people and events involved with the crash of Flight 93 on September 11, 2001 in Shanksville, PA. Oral history often records perspectives and experiences not normally documented with an emphasis on the human experience, and can often open up new sources of knowledge. Oral history is a particularly effective tool for parks that commemorate relatively recent events where witnesses are still living. Park interpreters recognize that statements of actual participants in an historical event bring realism and immediacy to a historic site or collection of artifacts.

The Park Service plans to develop a large memorial park at the site of the crash; at this time we do not yet know what that park will encompass. Will there be a museum, or will there be a smaller structure? What spaces will be constructed for the storage of archival materials and physical artifacts? Will there be staff to care for the items? At this point we simply do not know how the fruits of this oral history project will be utilized, therefore we need to approach the project with a broad scope and an open mission statement. It is the Historical Society's task to provide a sound academic foundation for what may be one of the largest and most important oral history collections in the National Park Service. To that end the Historical Society has hired Alexa Potter, a former research historian from the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. with extensive oral history experience, to develop a methodology to ensure that any interviews are done in a similar and purposeful fashion.

The problem we have been presented with is complex. Interviews will need to be conducted differently depending on who is being interviewed. The Flight 93 project is unusual in that oral history generally involves the perspective of survivors of a tragedy. We however will have to rely on the memories of friends, family, and acquaintances to give voice and depth to the passengers and crew of Flight 93. Our treatment of the passengers and crew of Flight 93 has done them a disservice in many ways, as the continued attachment of the term "hero" to their names has taken away their humanity. Rather than seeing them as ordinary people who acted with extraordinary courage in an extraordinary situation, they now have come to be viewed as above average people that acted as expected, a development which diminishes the tremendous sacrifice made by the passengers and crew on behalf of their fellow citizens. The interviews should give them back their individual identities, allowing us to gain some knowledge of what these individuals were like. It is through the imperfections and the characters of the passengers and crew that future users of these oral histories will come to understand the importance of the individual stories of those aboard Flight 93. It will provide them with points of comparison and reflection. It will also safeguard that any future history of Flight 93 will be able to draw upon a rich and detailed resource to flesh out the bare facts.

While the aforementioned "family" interviews will most likely be conducted in the form of an open narrative in the hopes of getting the most detail about each person, the interviews with the ground crews, the air traffic controllers, etc, will be much more about the facts surrounding Flight 93. Interviews will be need to be tailored to the individual's relation to the event, and will require greater knowledge of the event on the part of the interviewer. And yet many of these interviewees will also have an important personal connection to Flight 93 that should be explored.

The greatest potential pool of interviewees will be drawn from the "responders". This group is composed of the community members, the first responders, and the numerous local, state and federal investigative bodies that were involved in the aftermath of the crash. The community has become an important and intertwined part of the story of Flight 93, and recording the memories of community members will provide insight for future historians, sociologists, and other researchers. It is neither necessary nor feasible to interview every member of the community, however – a hierarchy of interview subjects will therefore need to be created, a process which has already begun.

In trying to devise a plan to identify and interview potentially thousands of people we have turned to the Park Service's own history for guidance. Given the scale of this project community members alone cannot be relied upon to conduct the interviews that will form part of the collection of a national memorial. We believe the best way to ensure that the interviews are done in a timely and professional manner will be to develop legitimate partnerships with at least three university programs. The National Park Service has already established precedence for conducting oral history projects in conjunction with universities, including arrangements between Truman National Historic Site and Middle Tennessee University, Denali National Park and National Preserve and the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, Acadia National Park and the Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Homestead National Monument of America and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Fort Hancock, Sandy Hook, Gateway National Recreation Area and Monmouth University, to name but a few. Partnerships generally take the form of graduate students, trained by their respective faculty members in the methodology and format of the project, conducting interviews with university owned equipment for academic credit or field work practice. Partnership, while obviously beneficial to the National Park Service, will also be appealing to universities, particularly those with graduate programs in oral history, such as the University of California at Berkeley and Columbia University. There is an undeniable prestige attached to working on a project tied to a national memorial, and students will always need field experience to prepare them for their futures as professional oral historians. Additionally, training and expertise would not have to be provided by the National Park Service, as they would draw upon their own faculty, and they would most likely supply their own equipment. Legal representatives from the National Park Service and the designated universities would need to draw up agreements stating the obligations of each, and to answer questions such as who would hold copyright of the material produced. The Flight 93 oral history project can draw upon the releases, agreements and experience of other National Park Service sites already engaged in cooperative programs, thus eliminating the oft-repeated National Park Service problem of reinventing the wheel.

Some consideration must be given to the possibility that student interviewers may be traumatized by these interviews. Several family members will be relating the story of the cellular phone calls made by their loved one from the plane. It is no easy thing to be told of the last words of someone facing imminent death, and some students may not be suited to the work. Community interviews will also be more successful if they are conducted by someone other than a neighbor, a friend, or a coworker. While some interviewees may prefer to be interviewed by someone they know, or have some bond with, it takes a very skillful interviewer to draw out the details necessary for a useful interview. It is inevitable that when the interviewer and the interviewee know each other, and have shared a similar experience, that they gloss over events and details, forgetting that the future listener will not have the advantage of personal knowledge of the subject.

How do we propose to bring this about? Working with a committee of professional oral historians, most of whom have already agreed to serve as advisors to the Flight 93 oral history project, we would develop an interview methodology and guidelines that would ensure that the interviews follow a similar, purposeful, and compassionate format. These oral history specialists include:

Linda Shopes is a historian with the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission, and has been a faculty member of the Columbia University Oral History Institute (1995-1997, 1999-2004). She has served as book review editor for the *Oral History Review* and as contributing editor for oral history for the *Journal of American History*. In 1998, she served as president of the U.S. Oral History Association. Among her many publications is the co-edited volume, *The Baltimore Book: New Views of Local History* and the forthcoming *Oral History and Public Memories* (working title), editor with Paula Hamilton, Technical University of Sydney (Australia). Under contract with Temple University Press, forthcoming 2006. She is a former president of the Oral History Association and an expert of the legalities of collecting and preserving oral history collections.

Dr. Jonathan Friedman is currently Director of Holocaust and Genocide Studies and Associate Professor of History at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania. His past work experience includes posts as a historian at the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation and historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where he served as lead researcher on two exhibitions (Deadly

Medicine: Creating the Master Race, and The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936). He holds a Ph.D. in German and Modern Jewish History from the University of Maryland, College Park and is the author of three books, *The Lion and the Star: Gentile-Jewish Relations in Three Hessian Communities* (University of Kentucky, 1998), *Speaking the Unspeakable: Essays on Sexuality, Gender, and Holocaust Survivor Memory* (University Press of America, 2003), and most recently, *The Literary, Cultural, and Historical Significance of the 1937 Biblical Stage Play "The Eternal Road"* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2005).

Dr. Joan Ringelheim moved to Washington, D.C. in 1991 to become the Research Director for the Permanent Exhibition of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. In this capacity she supervised the writing of the research briefs and the production of maps for the Permanent Exhibition. She also produced the audio theater program, "Voices from Auschwitz" for the third floor of the Permanent Exhibition. When the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in 1993, Joan was appointed as the Director of the Department of Oral History of the Museum's Research Institute. In 1997, she was appointed Director of the Division of Education in addition to supervising the work of the Department of Oral History. In 1999, Joan returned to direct the Department of Oral History. In this latter capacity, Joan has more than tripled the Museum's collection of oral history interviews; created a program to interview survivors about their post-liberation years; and expanded the Museum's video interview projects in the United States and Europe. There have been interview projects with Jewish survivors in the former Yugoslavia, Greece, Belarus, Poland and Ukraine; a project with Roma in the Czech Republic; and projects with witnesses, collaborators and perpetrators in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, and Moldavia. This project may be continued in Italy, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia.

Jessica Wiederhorn joined the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University as Associate Director in January 2002. Previously, she was the Manager of Academic Affairs at Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, where she presented the Foundation's work at conferences and symposia worldwide. During her tenure, she reviewed several hundred videotaped interviews of Holocaust survivors and witnesses, providing guidance and coaching to interviewers throughout the United States, England, Australia, and South Africa. Ms. Wiederhorn co-chaired the 2001 Oral History Association annual meeting in St. Louis, *Bearing Public Witness: Documenting Memories of Struggle and Resistance*. She has taught cultural and physical anthropology at Santa Monica College and California State University, Northridge and Los Angeles. Currently Ms. Wiederhorn administers a variety of oral history projects, seminars and workshops including the *September 11th 2001 Narrative and Memory Project*, a longitudinal oral history project to document the events and aftermath of a national trauma. She speaks widely on oral history and traumatic events. In September of 2003, she presented the work of the Oral History Research Office at *A Library of Congress Symposium: September 11 as History: Collecting Today for Tomorrow*. At present her research is focused on commonalities in survival narratives. This June, she gave a paper at the International Oral history Association Conference in Rome entitled, *The Struggle for Coherence in Stories of Catastrophe*.

We also hope Dr. Linenthal and Joanne Hanley will consent to join this professional committee, as well as any National Park Service oral historians Ms. Hanley cares to suggest. I would be most interested in involving Janet A. McDonnell, a NPS bureau historian who has recently written a draft "Handbook for Oral History in the National Park Service."

Once the methodology has been developed and approved by NPS, invitations can be made to a select group of universities with oral history projects to put the plan into action. With a pledge of support and the imprimatur of the National Park Service, and the assistance of some of the nation's leading authorities on oral history and finest universities, it will be possible to set up a model cooperative program on a national scale that will enable a significant number of subjects to be interviewed, far more than could ever be done by a single historian or a small group of individuals. Potential interviewees will feel far more comfortable working with a nationally recognized body, and are more likely to respond when inquiries are addressed to them from the National Park Service. The National Park Service can also draw upon significant internal resources to provide legal support for cooperative agreements, releases, and copyright issues, as well as the support of sites that have already undertaken extensive oral history projects.

We have in place a historian, a modest budget, and an extraordinarily talented team of professional oral historians to act as project advisors. With the approval of the Park Service we can get this project underway.