



**ORAL HISTORY
ASSOCIATION**

NEWSLETTER

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Becoming Texans, Becoming Americans: Vietnamese in North Texas Oral History Project

By Betsy Brody, Collin College, McKinney, Texas

North Texas is home to the fourth largest Vietnamese community in the United States, with more than a third of the Vietnamese people in Texas living in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, North Texas welcomed several waves of Vietnamese refugees, including elites who, having worked with and for the American government, evacuated along with U.S. forces leaving Vietnam in the mid-1970s.

A more educationally and economically heterogeneous group of refugees subsequently arrived in North Texas, as waves of “boat people” and participants in the United Nation’s Orderly Departure Program arrived in North Texas during the late 1970s to early 1990s.

Today, the Vietnamese community in North Texas is thriving, with Vietnamese refugees and their descendants making their lives in cities like Dallas, Arlington, Richardson and Garland. The area is home to a strong and rich network of Vietnamese economic and cultural institutions, and Vietnamese

families have successfully integrated into North Texas.

Growing up in North Texas during the 1980s, I had a front row seat to this part of Texas history and was surprised to find that little research had been done on this community. Through the generous support of a Charlton Oral History Research Grant from Baylor University's Institute for Oral History, I am collecting oral histories of the Vietnamese refugee community in North Texas.

The goals of the project are to preserve the stories of the community and to understand the experience of Vietnamese refugees and their families as they integrated into neighborhoods, schools, churches, temples and jobs. What were the challenges they faced as they became Texans?

One motivation for proposing and conducting this project was the gap in the literature on the experience of Vietnamese refugees to this part of Texas. Though the experience of Vietnamese refugees to other parts of the country and other parts of Texas has been studied extensively, there has been less academic attention to their pattern of settlement and integration in North Texas.

For example, while the experience of Vietnamese refugees who resettled as fishermen on the Texas Gulf Coast has been the subject of considerable journalistic and academic study, including oral history research, the same cannot be said for Vietnamese refugees in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. With completely different economic environments, how have the experiences of Vietnamese communities even within Texas differed?

In undertaking this project, I hoped to document the experiences of the Vietnamese community in this part of Texas and considered oral history research the ideal method for illuminating the factors that shaped the successful integration of this group into the economic, political, academic and social fabric of North Texas.

In previous oral history work on this community, Caroline Brettell and Deborah Reed-Danahay's research on immigrants' civic engagement, effectively uses oral histories to examine and compare the citizenship practices of Vietnamese and Indian communities in North Texas, using an anthropological framework for their analysis. My research and interviews examine political and civic engagement, but are also more broadly concerned with the process of family integration, workplace experiences and attitudes toward membership and belonging.

At the midpoint of the project, I am taking stock of my progress and evaluating how to address some of the challenges I have encountered thus far. While I have had a great response from and access to Vietnamese narrators, it has been considerably more challenging to locate and connect with local leaders who were involved in the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees during the 1970s

and 1980s. In part, this difference may be due to the fact that, having lived in this area for many years, I have connections within the local Vietnamese community, which have led to introductions to most of my Vietnamese narrators. This personal connection has helped to build trust ahead of the interview.

In contrast, many of the city officials, church leaders, school district leadership and police department officials who played a large role in helping Vietnamese refugees integrate into North Texas communities are either retired or no longer living in the area. In any case, I am continuing to develop strategies for overcoming this set of challenges.

Before starting the interviews, I had some concerns about the possibility of language being a challenge. Not being a Vietnamese speaker, I worried that Vietnamese-American narrators might have difficulty or discomfort in communicating their stories to me, as an outsider to their community. Fortunately, this has not been a real issue in the interviews so far. In fact, a number of stories related in the interviews have proven to be stories not yet related to the narrators' families.

Though I am still scheduling and conducting interviews, I can report on two strong themes that have emerged so far.

First, each of these stories has revealed that specific experiences of kindness and generosity from individuals in the host community made a significant difference in the families' ability to adjust to and survive starting their lives over in a new and unfamiliar country. From strangers donating cars and motorcycles to their new Vietnamese neighbors to sponsor families driving across town to purchase large bags of rice so refugee families could feel more at home, each narrator has emphasized the impact of these simple gestures on their adjustment to their new lives in Texas.

A second theme concerns the way narrators' experiences as refugees have shaped their attitudes about identity. Narrators have revealed a great deal of flexibility about their identity, describing the ways that they blend their Vietnamese culture with their American citizenship. As one narrator put it, "I read the newspaper every day in English, but I pray in Vietnamese."

Editor's note: If you want more information about Betsy's project, you can contact her at: betsy.t.brody@gmail.com



Meet the President



Co-Executive Directors' Report

Editor's apology

The last issue of the *OHA Newsletter* contained a story about a presentation at the Montreal conference by a team of collaborators from the University of Winnipeg who described their Manitoba Food History Project and its unique creation of a food truck as a mobile interviewing studio.

The story, however, failed to mention the role of project collaborator Kimberley Moore, who is program coordinator at the university's Oral History Centre and who participated on the panel.

Moore is responsible for the project's photography, truck design, blinking-neon logo and project archival processes. She is also responsible for the project's website and ArcGIS story maps, developing and delivering workshops to teach students storytelling and oral history methodology, among other contributions.

The editor apologizes for omitting Moore's name and contributions to the unique project.

To learn more about the Manitoba Food History Project, visit:

<https://www.manitobafoodhistory.ca/>

Coming Up

Right away...

If you or someone you know wants an oral history refresher course or a chance to explore writing with oral history, check out the Oral History Summer School in Hudson, New York: www.oralhistorysummerschool.com.

A June 10-19 workshop, “Oral History Intensive + Oral History and Public Art,” still has a few slots for this rigorous introduction to oral history, covering project design, interviewing techniques, ethics and recording.

A June 27-July 2 workshop, “I am Sitting in a Room, Part I: Oral History & Writing,” will help students experiment with a variety of literary forms that use oral history as source material.

Oral historians, artists, advocates and researchers are all encouraged to participate. Several openings remain for both workshops.

In July...

Proposals are due July 15 for “Threads of Change,” the next annual meeting of the National Council on Public History, set for March 18-21, 2020, in Atlanta.

The theme for the 40th anniversary of the NCPH emphasizes the constant evolution of communities, people and their stories and the intangibles of cultural memory, which public historians tell in museums, archives, publications and historic places. Conference planners encourage creative presentation formats (instead of reading papers!) and will give preference to proposals that include traditionally underrepresented voices and sessions that consider public impact.

For more details, visit: <http://ncph.org/conference/2020-annual-meeting>

In December...

Make plans for a first-ever OHA-sponsored trip to Cuba, set for Dec. 13-20.

This fascinating island country is unlike any other in the world, and many OHA members have chronicled its complicated history, politics and culture for decades.

The customized trip will be led by Charles Bittner, who teaches sociology at St. John’s University in New York City. Plans include meetings with distinguished professors of history, economics and sociology from the University of Havana as well as visits to



museums with art historians and discussions with political scientists about the history of U.S.-Cuba relations.

Participants also will enjoy music at private concerts with Cuba's foremost jazz and trova artists. We will hear the stories of Afro-Cuban activists, visit the private studios of celebrated artists, and drink and dine at the new paladars (private restaurants), introduced as part of Raul Castro's economic reforms.

The OHA member cost of this tour is \$3,695 (double occupancy) / \$4,195 (single occupancy) per person, which includes five nights at the four-star NH Capri Hotel de Habana, two evenings at a private guesthouse in Trinidad, all ground transportation within Cuba, guided tours, seminars, lectures, entrance to Cuba's preeminent museums and attractions, several private music concerts and dance performances, almost all your meals, including libations and many other activities and events.

SPACE IS LIMITED

Additional details, registration documents, and the complete itinerary may be found here: <https://www.oralhistory.org/2019/03/27/oha-in-cuba/>

For further information, contact Charles Bittner at charlesbittner@verizon.net or 617-833-1435.

Travel to Cuba is authorized under a General Educational, people-to-people license.

A portion of the proceeds will help support the OHA.

In the June *OHA Newsletter*...



OHA members can have a voice in the leadership of the organization by voting for OHA officers, Council and Nominating Committee members in online elections this summer.

Biographical information and candidate statements will be in the next issue of the ***OHA Newsletter*** along with instructions for how to cast your ballot.



Visit the OHA Member Site



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Co-Executive Directors' Report

By Kristine McCusker

The OHA Executive Office is working on various projects right now that will benefit you, our members.

The website is updated to meet the new security measures required by the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation.

You've already seen an announcement about the trip to Cuba. We hope many of you will go because Charles Bittner, our guide, has been to Cuba more than 30 times and promises to be a first-rate tour leader. See the details below. If you can't go this time, the OHA likely will sponsor another trip, perhaps in two years.

We're also working on producing a webinar featuring Molly Graham, who will discuss oral history and podcasting. The webinar is tentatively set for June, with more details to come. Some of you may remember that Molly ran a sold-out workshop last year at the Montreal annual conference on a similar subject. If you miss the webinar, Faith Bagley, our intrepid program associate, has set up our very own YouTube channel where you can view the webinar. We hope to keep adding new material.

Kris McCusker went to Philadelphia for the Organization of American Historians conference and made some nice connections with other professional societies while also seeing plenty of OHA folks there. Finally, Kris, Faith and Louis Kyriakouides helped judge the Tennessee State History Day competition and have been working on (and awarding!) an OHA award for the best use of oral history.

Finally, we say goodbye to our wonderful master's student, Keneisha Mosely, who has done a tremendous job this past year, working on projects such as organizing registrations for us for the Montreal meeting. Keneisha has an internship this summer at the Rutherford County Archives (in Murfreesboro, Tennessee) and will probably be teaching this fall.

President's Column

By Natalie Fousekis

Happy Spring!

It's hard to believe it has been six months since we all gathered in Montreal for our annual meeting and I began my presidency of this dynamic, diverse organization of oral history practitioners. Since then I have been struck by the generosity of our members and their willingness to volunteer to serve on standing committees, ad-hoc committees, award committees and task forces. I admire the dedication so many of you have to this organization and appreciate all your hard work on our behalf.

I am delighted to report that Council has had a very active 2019 thus far. In February we all gathered in Salt Lake City at the site of our 2019 conference for two days of work and conversation about the priorities of the organization. We were all taken with the beauty of the city with the Wasatch Range rising behind the downtown skyline. I can't wait to return in October when the mountains won't be covered with snow, as they were in February, but with their brilliant fall colors.

It was our first mid-winter meeting with our four new council members: Sarah Milligan, Gwen Etter-Lewis, Alexander Freund and our First-VP Dan Kerr. I have appreciated their thoughtful questions, contributions and insight since they joined council in October. The organization will benefit from their energy, diverse perspectives and talents for the next few years.

At our mid-winter meeting we continued to work on developing OHA's sexual harassment policy. We reviewed a draft policy developed by Executive Director Louis Kyriakoudes based on conversations with an attorney and a survey of policies established by organizations similar to OHA. We discussed the policy, made suggestions for revision and focused in on the process for handling a sexual harassment claim once it has been made. We will have a well-developed policy to share with the membership when we all meet in Salt Lake City.

I am also excited to announce we have begun the process of developing a new strategic plan. Our last strategic plan (2014-2017) proved extremely helpful in setting the priorities of the organization for the past five years. At the mid-winter meeting, council selected and approved the hiring of a strategic planning consultant. We held our kick-off conference call with her in late April. She was pleased to see that we had recently conducted a membership survey, which will assist us as we move forward with this process.

We will spend the next few months as a council doing a SWOT analysis to identify the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. We will reach out to the membership for additional input during this process. Council will arrive in Salt Lake City early this October to dedicate an entire day to develop the priorities for our new strategic plan. I look forward to updating all of you at the conference on where we are in the process.

Thank you to those who have already responded to my request to serve on OHA award committees! We still have a few committees that need volunteers. Should you be interested in serving on an award committee or have any other questions/concerns about OHA, please reach out to me directly – nfousekis@fullerton.edu