

## Oral history: A rich tapestry of information



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ORAL TRADITIONS are embedded in most of the world's cultures and have long been an important part of te ao Māori (Taonui, 2005). History has been passed down by word of mouth for millennia. The development of writing in many civilisations then resulted in people relying on written documents for information about the past. Oral histories can provide another piece of the jigsaw, if you are researching a particular topic or issue. They provide context and a different perspective, along with giving a more rounded view of all the issues that arose relating to an incident or event. The facts and figures relating to an event are vital; however oral histories are a useful research source to provide a more complete picture. Interviews are not about collecting truth – they are about collecting people's memories. One may argue that a person's memories are their truth.

### What is oral history?

Oral history is a research methodology used by students, academics, journalists, documentary-makers and podcasters, along with community-based and family historians. It involves extended, recorded interviews undertaken for a specific purpose and, on occasion, results in eventual archiving for preservation and public access.

Developments in sound-recording technology have enabled us to collect and accurately preserve, as oral history, word-of-mouth stories and memories about a subject of historical interest. We can now record and preserve the unique memories and life experiences of ordinary yet amazing people, along with more prominent and well-known individuals. We can eavesdrop on past events, feelings, attitudes and ways of life (Hamilton Libraries, n.d.).

Through the recording of oral history, we are able to capture the view of eyewitnesses, therefore providing new or additional information and insights. This provides an opportunity to hear from those people who are often left out of historical records – the ordinary people who have taken part in significant events and have an invaluable and unique perspective (Oral History Australia, 2023).

There are two main types of oral history interview:

- 1) **Life history interviews** – for example, an interview that focuses on the life and the changes experienced by a person in their lifetime.
- 2) **Topic interviews** – these record information about a specific subject, such as an interview with someone about the history of a workplace or occupation or industry sector.

The recording and use of oral history may give rise to ethical considerations. The National Oral History Association of New Zealand has published a Code of Ethical and Technical Practice (NOHANZ, 2023) that sets out the responsibilities of interviewers and collectors of oral history. In some cases there are access and use restrictions on oral history material. It's important to bear these in mind and follow any use protocols that are in place. Some interviewees share thoughts and experiences with the interviewer that they may not have ever told anyone before and it can be a painful yet cathartic experience. If a researcher is intending to republish, in the public domain, quotes from an interview, then confidentiality and privacy consideration may need to be taken into account. It's a matter of balancing the need to tell the story and share it with a wider audience against whether it may cause stress and upset to any of the parties that are mentioned in the interview (Gorter, 2023). Another issue that can arise in oral history is that there may be competing versions of the "truth":

*"In an interview you get one person telling one story and then another one tells you a whole other conflicting story. Cross checking is important; if there is written material and other accounts, read it. . . . Whānau interviews are not about collecting truth, they are about collecting people's memories. The thing to note is that there are different accounts and [to] respect the differences". (Ministry of Education, n.d.)*

By interviewing a relative, genealogists are often able to find a missing link when compiling whakapapa or a family tree. Oral histories are often the best way for families to capture and preserve the life stories and experiences of their parents and grandparents. Imagine the social and technological changes an 85-year-old person has witnessed in their lifetime.

### Oral History and Sound Collection

There are more than 10,000 recordings in the the Oral History and Sound Collection at the Alexander Turnbull Library (NatLib, n.d.). Recordings include interviews with people from throughout New Zealand and the Pacific, of various ethnicities, iwi (tribe) and hapū (sub-tribe), occupations, political affiliations and interests. Most of the collection has been recorded since the 1960s and covers New Zealand society, culture, community and political history from the late 19th century to the present. Interviews usually have accompanying documentation, including an abstract – a detailed time-coded index providing quick access to the contents of the recording. Within that collection are oral history interviews with New Zealand nurses.

## EXAMPLES OF INTERVIEWS IN THE NERF ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:

◆ **Ailsa Douglas McCutchan** gives some family background information. Describes several years in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (1942-1945) as librarian, mess-hand and link trainer mechanic in Whenuapai, Blenheim, Hamilton and Hobsonville. Explains why she commenced training as a nurse in 1945 at preliminary school called 'Cargun', a building in Eden Cres, Auckland. Describes tutors with reference to Sister Saker and staff nurse Turner; morning duty in women's surgical ward; hierarchy; 'divide nurse' – split duties; effects of shortages of food and linen after the war; Auckland Hospital buildings in the 1940s and the military annexe with reference to nurses' attitudes to this all-male ward; dysentery contracted during first year of training; measures to avoid spread of infection". (Recording of Ailsa McCutchan, 1983-84)

◆ **Judith Christensen** discusses her nursing background and her appointment as Head of School, Nursing, Health and Environmental Studies, at Wellington Polytechnic. Recalls participation in nursing education changes in colleges in Quebec. Discusses: Curriculum requirements and development; doctors' participation; pilot programme; accommodation of School of Nursing – cottages in Finlay Terrace and Tasman St; bedmaking and basic skills; equipment and facilities; public response to the nursing programme and PSA opposition. Mentions Elsie Boyd (Health Department); Shona Carey (NZNA); Dr Helen Carpenter; Pauline McGuinness; Shireley Bohm and Jan Hough. (Interview with Judith Christensen, 1984)

◆ **Isabelle Sherrard** trained as a nurse at Christchurch Hospital c.1956. Discusses orientation to the hospital and the programme. Recalls marrying 10 days after sitting State exams. Explains how career was subsequently influenced by husband's work and education, taking her to Northern Ireland in 1962 where she spent six months in a geriatric hospital on the outskirts of Belfast before moving to Houston, Texas, working in intensive care unit, and later to Ann Arbor, Michigan, working at the University of Michigan in the burns unit. Discusses different kinds of nursing education/training in the States. Recalls return to New Zealand with two children and fitting in part-time work at the Chalet Hospital, Dunedin Hospital, and in 1976 settling in Auckland. Mentions Carpenter Report and its effect on nursing in New Zealand. Mentions undertaking nursing courses at Massey University, gaining a BA in Education. Discusses appointment as tutor at ATI (Auckland Technical Institute), with reference to Yvonne Shadbolt, Lani Kelliher and Sue Otto. Commenced at Carrington Polytechnic (1985) and discusses involvement in employing staff and setting up Advisory Committee, with reference to male dominated hierarchy. Discusses curriculum and demands of clinical and theoretical components of the programme; student selection and criteria; Māori and Pacific Island applicants; cultural safety, with reference to Paul Spoonley and Irahapete Murchie, cultural awareness and Treaty of Waitangi. Mentions Judy Kilpatrick at the Nursing Council. (Interview with Isabelle Sherrard, 1996)

### Nursing History website

The Nursing History website is an online archive of New Zealand nursing oral histories. Its aim is to create a resource that nurses, students, academics, researchers and family members can access in order to gain a better understanding of our country's nursing history (NERF, 2015).

The website is funded by NZNO's Nursing Education and Research Foundation (NERF) and includes the Oral History Project undertaken by the University of Auckland in 2012 and 2013. The project team, comprised of Professor Linda Bryder, Associate Professor Margaret Horsburgh, Dr Debbie Dunsford and Dr Kate Prebble, recorded the stories of nurses who trained during the 1950s and

1960s. Linda Bryder worked with two University of Auckland History Department summer scholars, Emma Cotton and Kaitlin McLeod, over the summer of 2014/15, to select highlights from the interviews to post on the website. You can listen to these excerpts on the website and see other associated photos and information. The full oral histories collected by the University of Auckland project team, as well as earlier ones, are stored with the Alexander Turnbull Library's Oral History and Sound Collection in Wellington

### Nursing Education and Research Foundation

The origins of the Nursing Education and Research Foundation (NERF) can be traced back to donations placed in a memorial fund established by NZNO to commemorate the life and work of Flora

J Cameron OBE (former director, Division of Nursing) who died in 1966. These donations formed the basis of a permanent fund which would provide New Zealand nurses with travel grants, scholarships and other assistance to enhance opportunities for continuing education, professional development and research (Stevenson, 2000).

## NERF Oral History Project

NERF promotes excellence in nursing and health care by providing funding opportunities for education and research. A range of NERF's scholarships and funding opportunities are offered through the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) website (NZNO, 2014).

In 1982, NERF began the first in a series of projects to collect the oral histories of nurses in New Zealand. All of the interviews can be accessed via the Alexander Turnbull Library, with permission granted by the NZNO librarian on behalf of NERF (contact library@nzno.org.nz). Although digitalisation of many of the interviews has begun, some are still only in taped format (NERF, 1983-84).

A total of 22 volunteer interviewers undertook 185 oral history interviews in the initial NERF Oral History Project and they were deposited with the Alexander Turnbull Library Oral History Centre in September 1984.

These included:

- 13 interviews with nurses registered before 1920
- 59 with nurses registered from 1920-29
- 70 with nurses who had registered between 1930 and 1939
- 36 with nurses registered between 1940 and 1949
- three with nurses registered after 1950.

Further individual and private additions to the collection were made between 1984 and 2000 including:

- the Psychiatric Nurses Oral History Project (six interviews) (NERF, 1988-89)
- the transfer of nursing education from hospitals to polytechnics (38 interviews), Yvonne Langridge (NERF, 1993-94)
- nursing biographies (five interviews), Yvonne Langridge
- nursing biographies – Wellington Polytechnic 1973-1998 (21 interviews), Yvonne Langridge
- Nurses & Midwives Oral History Project (seven interviews), 1992-3, Marie Burgess
- Neonatal Nursing Oral History Project (20 interviews), Penelope Dunkley
- Wartime Nurses Project (11 interviews), 1999, Anna Rogers
- "Oranje" Oral History Project (10 interviews), Marie de Joux
- Nursing in World War II (two interviews), Valerie Fisher
- Royal NZ Plunket Society (20 interviews), Plunket Society
- Little Company of Mary (nursing order) (12 interviews), LCM & Ann Trotter

In 2011, NERF called for tenders to continue to grow the NERF Oral History Archive. A project team from Auckland University were appointed and during 2012 and 2013 collected the following interviews with people who trained as nurses in New Zealand in the 1950s and 1960 (NERF, 2012-14):

- One participant who trained in the 1930s (Joyce Oliver).

- Thirty participants who trained in the 1950s.
- Thirty participants who trained in the 1960s.

For examples of the interviews in the NERF Oral History Project, see the box on page 63.

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