

Questions & Answers

While most of our time is spent in traditional archives, the Idaho Power Company has presented SHRA with a unique opportunity to consult on its 2016 centennial celebration. An oral history project to capture the stories of past and present Idaho Power employees is a vital part of the retrospective. We have aimed to acquire a variety of narratives from men and women from a wealth of differing backgrounds, and the collection and interpretation of these interviews have yielded useful anecdotes that are enriching the corporate history. In their own words, interviewees tell the history and explain the impact of advancing technology, of women shattering the glass ceiling, and of the evolving treatment of natural resources. Such personal experiences augment and enhance the materials gleaned from more typical corporate archival research.

While oral histories cannot replace documentary research, historical testimony can add nuanced details and perspectives that documents simply cannot. Exhaustive research helps us unearth the written record of a particular topic, but sometimes we are left with questions that are impossible to answer without a human witness. “Why did you do that?” “What do you mean?” “How did that that change things?” In the case of histories of peoples whose use of the written word was limited, the oral tradition is irreplaceable.

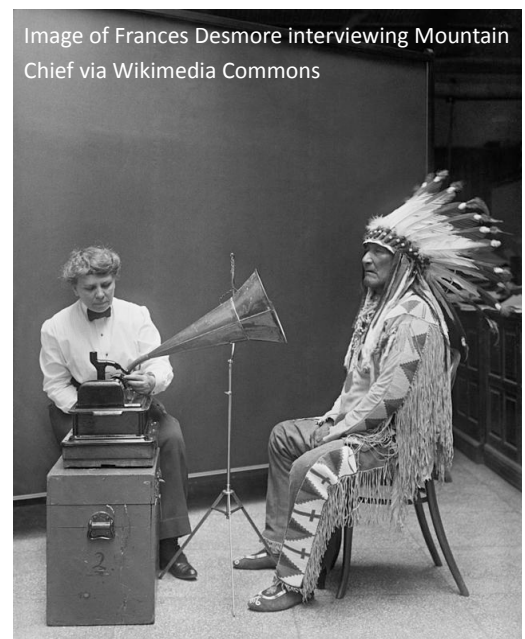
Oral history using audio or visual recordings originated with Columbia University historian Allan Nevins, who established Columbia University’s Oral History Research Office in 1948. Today, the Columbia Oral History Archive is both the oldest and largest of its kind, boasting nearly 8,000 taped memoirs and roughly 1,000,000 pages of transcripts.

Despite the reach of oral histories, the use of interviews remains tricky, as shown by the scholarly debate over history and memory. The prime question has been whether people’s memories are, in fact, reliable. Attorneys’ use of oral histories in litigation has resulted in both successes and failures. The Yakima Nation used oral tradition in *Cree v. Flores* (1999) to describe its passed-down memories of treaty times in a modern dispute over trucking fees. In that case, the State of Washington, which had employed a history professor as its expert, argued that the trial court had improperly allowed the Tribe’s expert to rely too heavily on oral tradition. The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals disagreed and upheld the district court’s decision in favor of the Tribe. In a 1995 environmental lawsuit, *Chicchia v. Lycott Environmental Research, Inc.*, the court decided against the environmental cleanup company, encouraging the use of oral history by implying that the firm had merely needed to ask anyone with a history in the town how significant the mill on the site had been.

In the Idaho Power project, we have sought to strike the necessary balance between respecting the interviewee and upholding the integrity of the research, and have consequently illuminated a business history that goes much deeper than the bottom line. While we certainly still enjoy getting dusty in archives chasing down historical documents, we have relished our time getting answers to our questions.

- Jennifer Stevens & Stephanie Milne-Lane

(Thanks to *Oral History and the Law* by John A. Neuenschwander for some of the litigation facts used in this piece.)



SHRA Associates News

On Research

In Dr. Jennifer Stevens' Urban Environmental History course at Boise State University this spring, archivists at BSU's Special Collections helped students research Boise's environmental history. The students' work is published at urbanenvironmentalboise.wordpress.com.

Stephanie Milne-Lane and her fellow Boise City Arts & History committee members slated speakers for the Fettuccine Forum, a program of lectures to promote good citizenship.

Naomi Heindel interviews local prospective students for her alma mater Dartmouth College, does volunteer grant writing for the Discovery Center of Idaho, and conducts research for the Idaho Conservation League.

Dr. Stevens will be presenting on historical research for litigation at a continuing legal education seminar on June 24, 2015, in Boise. Contact us for further details.

Often the scholarship produced by SHRA is for private clients and not available to the public. Recently, however, two of our reports have been published as appendices to the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality's draft sediment TMDL on the Boise River. Both reports relate to the early history of the Boise River and its tributaries, as well as to the delivery systems that were constructed. You can access the reports online through our blog or at deq.idaho.gov.

Additionally, Jennifer Stevens has published an article in the February 2015 edition of *The Public Historian*, the National Council on Public History's journal, that further explains the role of hands-on research. That piece, titled "From Archive to Evidence: Historians and Natural Resource Litigation," is also available on our blog (look for "Spring Newsletter 2015").

Interested in knowing more about Idaho Power's Centennial Celebration? A museum exhibit created by SHRA will travel throughout southern Idaho and eastern Oregon in 2016. Look for an announcement and a showing near you.



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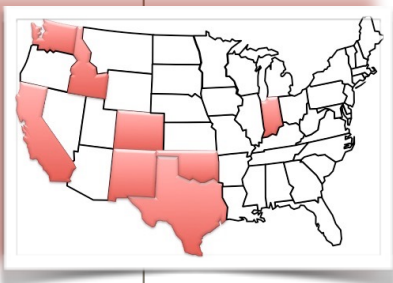
History in the Making

SHRA is conducting historical research on:

Fraudulent land surveys in Colorado; Superfund/CERCLA projects, including legacy zinc and lead smelters, mineral processing plants, and polluted waterways and groundwater basins involving multiple PRPs; Water use disputes; Historic navigability studies; Interstate water rights dispute; and Idaho Power's 2016 Centennial celebration.

SHRA is currently combing the records of the:

International Boundary and Water Commission, Washington State Fish and Game Commission, U.S. Geological Survey, Federal Power Commission/Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, National Resources Committee, corporate and newspaper archives, and more!



Map courtesy of ppt-toolkit.com

SHRA is currently working in:

California, Indiana, New Mexico, Colorado, Washington, Texas, Oklahoma, and Idaho