

OHAA On Tape

June 2004

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Hello Everyone!

Well, the year's half over already. I hope you've enjoyed it so far.

I've been busy for the last few weeks. My husband, Terry, is a veterans' coach at Toowong Rowing Club and we all attended the National Masters Rowing Championship at the Olympic rowing course at Penrith a couple of weeks ago. Terry coached the Queensland men's and women's interstate crews (mainly comprised of Toowong members) and both crews won. Their fitness is amazing – all in middle age and enjoying life and their sport. They are a wonderful example to all of us all. Congratulations to them!

Away from the rowing, I had a wonderful time exploring the area. I took a train trip up the Blue Mountains on one of the lovely crisp sunny days to experience the glorious views. And I squeezed in an oral history interview in Sydney with a remarkable woman who is the widow of the highest ranking Australian soldier to die in the Korean War. You may have seen her on Andrew Denton's show. I had been corresponding with her by email for about a year and took the opportunity to meet her in person. This wonderful lady embarked on a second career after her retirement, learning to be a chef in France

and then returning to Australia to research the Korean War. In the process, she learned just how remarkable were the achievements of her late husband, Charlie Green. Look out for my interview with Olwyn on my web site in the next few months.

Terry and I then went off to Canberra and visited the Australian Museum, the War Museum, Old Parliament House and the new Parliament House where we sat in on Question Time.

We've got an exciting workshop planned for 13 November 2004 with Reminiscence Therapist, Marilyn Roberts. We'll also have our Annual General Meeting on that day. You'll learn more about this in our September newsletter but please mark your calendars!

Committee members, Kate Roberts and Maxine Kendall represented our Association in a stand at the History Fair at Mount Gravatt and enjoyed the interaction with other stallholders.

Please don't forget to renew your membership. A form is included in this newsletter. Those who have joined in the last three months will carry on their membership.

Suzanne Mulligan
Editor

Logan City Council Celebrates 25 Years

Mary Howells

Logan City Council is a relatively new local authority created by an Act of Parliament in mid 1978. It was formed to serve the rapidly growing urban subdivisions in the Beaudesert and Albert Shires on the southern outskirts of Brisbane. The first elections were held in April 1979.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the formal establishment of Logan City and there is a select group of staff who have been employees for that whole period. To celebrate their experiences over that quarter-century, an oral history project has been commissioned.

It will document the experiences of staff and their views on the transformation of the organization over that time-frame. These staff are expected to provide fascinating insights into the obstacles and challenges they faced and overcame.

Importantly, the project will capture first-hand memories of 'the early days' as they are still known by surviving staff. As Logan City Council is the primary service organization in what is now Queensland's third largest city, the project will record some of the important changes in the community over that period as well.

This initiative is being jointly run by Marketing and Communication Manager David M. Russell, and the Libraries and Cultural Services Projects Coordinator, Mary Howells.

Initially every staff member with 25 years of service will be briefly interviewed. A selection of informants will then be made, to best represent a range of occupations and experiences. In-depth interviews will follow. Later in 2004, a yearbook will be produced documenting the life and times of staff of Logan City Council.

TOOWONG ORAL HISTORY

Leigh Chamberlain

I became interested in recording oral histories about three years ago and I started collecting the reminiscences of people who either lived, or now live in Toowong, or who had, or still have involvement in the Toowong community.

I have a large number of interviews and I have been very busy this year with processing these. I have had to organise transcripts to be typed and checked by the interviewee for accuracy of typing. Check spelling errors, accuracy of facts and to eliminate ambiguity. Any supporting data also needed to be processed e.g. photograph scanning, copying of relevant documents or newspaper articles.

I live in Toowong and although I had lived here in the suburb since 1974, I didn't realise how much of its history I was unaware of, despite such a long residency. I have also discovered that many of the older folk are anxious for their knowledge to be recorded and these people are only too happy to be interviewed. Also, some people are pleased that someone else is interested in what they have to say, because in quite a few cases, their younger family members are not. A reminiscing session is much enjoyed by the older folk.

Last year a group of local people identified a need for a constituted history society with a membership structure in Toowong and The Toowong and District Historical Society Inc. was formed. I have joined this organisation.

I am continuing my volunteer work in recording oral history and receiving support from the Toowong and District Historical Society with the processing of the material. I have run a series of workshops to introduce the Society's members to the lure of 'getting on tape' the great stories around us in our local community. The Society has purchased equipment for interviewing and we have this year conducted interview sessions with separate interview stations, and we have found that four people can be interviewed at once in this way. A good time was had by all and was thoroughly enjoyed.

We have established a research committee to administer this programme and to co-ordinate the associated research that is so necessary to provide a re-capture of the lost early history of our community. We had a workshop to identify the information that we wish to collect for our files. Mindful that the chance to gather material only comes around once, and one needs to grab it while one has the chance, the research committee designed an interview guide to assist the interviewer in his/her interview.

In the interviews, the Society is collecting childhood memories of their families and of growing up, the household routine, their childhood friends, memories of people in the local neighbourhood, memories of the street (a sketch map is of use here), going to the shops, to church, school (a mud map of their route to school), boy scouts, girl guides and playing sport or music etc. If the person has had a lengthy association with Toowong, we ask if they could give a potted biography of their life and to recount anecdotes about people around them. They are asked if they remember significant events and if they were involved in community life in any capacity. Lastly, they are asked to take a mental walk around the suburb and relate their memories about the people, the place and experiences.

I am constantly amazed at what people have tucked away in their cupboards and the provenance attached to such items. Precious items are produced for display, photo albums are unearthed and fragile china brought out of the china cabinet for examination. (I do so love admiring fine china!).

Meanwhile I am preparing my first manuscript from some of my taped interviews. All progressing well, the manuscript should be ready for a book launch in the latter part of the year. There is a wealth of material available in the files of the Toowong and District Historical Society Inc. and we look forward to further publications.

RECORDING ADVICE

On the matter of archivability (if it's not a word, perhaps it should be!), if analog is used for the original recording of interviews, using good tape is important, and the equipment should be in good order too. I assume we are talking cassette tapes, and I am one of many who have been able to retrieve fairly good sound from very old tapes, but have found a lot of degradation too, sometimes to the point of being unable to retrieve very much at all. I recommend 60-minute cassettes; 90-minute are okay if good quality, but please avoid 120-minute.

Recorder heads should be kept clean, and demagnetised, and the drive belts should be kept in good order -- a very common problem is cassette tapes that play back too fast on a properly calibrated machine because they were recorded too slow on a machine with worn belts, or some other transport speed problem.

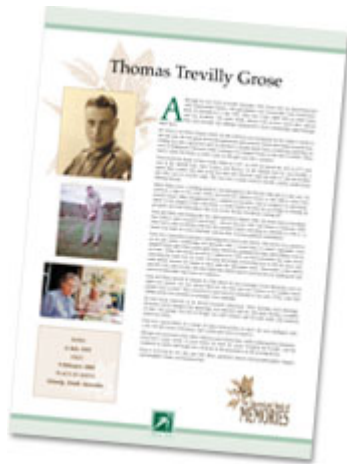
Will you hear the voice back at the 'real' pitch in years to come, or a falsely recorded higher pitch? I've also found retrievable sound on cassettes that have been knocking around in someone's garage for 20 years, but that was probably good luck, and they weren't without problems which could have been avoided. Far better if tapes are looked after well post-recording. The field recording situation is probably the biggest danger here -- relatively fast temperature changes in the car for example.

The problem of retrieving sound from cassettes is also frequently compounded by bad recording technique. For any recording, digital or analog, be aware of the increase in audibility problems with factors like background noise. Sure, in our field recording situations, sometimes it can be hard to avoid, but don't be embarrassed to give it some thought and get interviewee's co-operation to make suitable arrangements. Beware of room echo from shiny surfaces, air-con or fans, and noisy refrigerators. Where (genuinely) unavoidable, the effects of background noise can be minimised by ensuring that all speakers are nice and close to a mike, and input volume is adjusted accordingly. Mikes an arm-length or more from a voice will pick up all the background noise at the same level as the voice.

Given the potential problems with cassette recorders, if new equipment is being considered, there is much support for the handy, relatively cheap minidisk, despite all the down side. But whether analog or digital equipment is used for the original recording, the main point is to archive properly. A safety copy of an analog cassette tape (on another cassette) is a poor choice; a truly archival analog tape copy requires equipment well beyond the means of most (if you could get hold of it). On the matter of choice between analog and digital for the original recording, if you want to make a digital copy to archive, you may not be able to make a direct digital copy recording from a MD (i.e. you may have to use the analog output converted from the digital MD, re-digitised by the digital recorder making the archival copy), BUT the analog output from a MD is still going to be better than the analog output from a cassette tape.

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Welcome to the Queensland Book of Memories



Introducing... the Queensland Book of Memories.

Make the story of someone you have loved, a close friend or a colleague become a part of Australia's history – for all time.

There are plenty of records of the lives and achievements of famous and infamous men and women.

Yet most people leave us without any personal history or testimony of their life and times being preserved.

The National Trust of Queensland now offers the opportunity to leave an indelible reminder of the life of someone you have known; someone who perhaps gained neither fame nor infamy

but nevertheless had a story to tell that is well worth remembering; someone whose life was of importance to your family; someone you loved or who was a close friend.

Seal a place for this person in the history of Australia

This website tells you how to have them included in the Book of Memories.

There are different volumes for each state and territory.

At the Mount Gravatt History Fair, representatives from “The Australian Book of Memories” proposed that our Association join with them as a “partner”. This was discussed at our last committee meeting, and it was agreed that the Oral History Association of Australia (Qld Inc) would become a “partner” to the “Queensland Book of Memories”. The owner of the Book of Memories, the National Trust, is prepared to share the income from the sale of pages in the Book of Memories with “partner” organizations. Generally, partner organizations receive 20% of the income from all purchases of pages in the Book of Memories made through that organization. This may be of financial benefit to the Oral History Association should members choose to purchase a page through our Association. In return we will promote the Book of Memories.

For more information see:

<http://www.australianbookofmemories.com>

Ron Steinman. *Women in Vietnam: The Oral History*. New York: TV Books, 2000. 271 pp. Photographs. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 1-57500-139-X.

Reviewed by **Donna M. Dean**, Independent Scholar.

Lest They Be Forgotten

Women tend to be forgotten as warriors and participants on the battlefield and in war zones, although that may change somewhat with the war in Iraq and the high-profile individual women who have been killed, taken prisoners, or are missing in action. The Vietnam War was far different. Many people, including veterans, did not and do not realize that there were many American women in Vietnam, both in and out of uniform. It is this neglect that the author seeks to correct, at least to some degree. Sadly, a theme that appears repeatedly in the stories is the fact that even some male veterans who served in Vietnam deny there were ever any women there, thus further exacerbating the feelings of exclusion and neglect many of the women express.

This book is comprised of interviews conducted by Ron Steinman for a television documentary, "Women at War." Steinman is an acclaimed journalist, television producer, news producer, and author who served as the NBC Bureau Chief in Saigon during the war. The sections of the book are divided into brief stories of the women who served, who are also separated into several categories. The largest section consists of interviews with six Army nurses and one Air Force flight nurse, two entertainers, two "Doughnut Dollies" or Red Cross Recreational Specialists, and four WACs who served in support positions. There are no interviews with Navy nurses or Navy WAVES, although one or two did serve in-country. Although missionary women are mentioned briefly, there are no interviews.

In reading through the book, some themes appear throughout the stories, regardless of what the individual's job might have been, and regardless of whether the woman's voice is that of a uniformed member of the armed forces, a Red Cross volunteer, or an entertainer. All of the women suffer severely from delayed stress reactions of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and their condition has been exacerbated by the hostility, neglect, avoidance, or disinterest in the receptions they received when they returned home. The Vietnam War was decidedly unpopular, and there was no "support the troops" movement. Returning troops returned alone, not as a unit as they had in previous wars, and so did the women. They were met with the same hostility as the soldiers, and if they continued to wear the uniform, they continued to reap the whirlwind of political decisions over which they had no control. Heartbreakingly, one nurse tells of having to wear civilian clothes over her uniform to enter and leave the base where she was stationed to avoid the violent displays of anger and anti-war sentiment.

Most of the women were extremely young when they were ordered or volunteered to go to Vietnam, and naïve as well. They received little or no preparation for entering a war zone, dealing with the horrendous conditions, or, in the case of the nurses and flight nurses, trying to treat hideous wounds direct from the battlefield with poor or even inadequate equipment. Most were forced to carry out their assignments under constant bombardment and deadly danger. Their accounts are full of the coping mechanisms of individuals under such circumstances, the psychic numbing, over-indulgence in alcohol, promiscuity, and self-isolation; each woman had her own way of trying to survive, and each paid a terrible price for her sacrifices. When they returned home, none spoke of their experiences after a few abortive tries; no one wanted to hear it or to know. So they kept silent for many years, until

something triggered the overwhelming grief and anger, causing it to spill over. The lucky ones got therapy. By then, it was too late to reconstruct a full, normal life, but all the women in this book have managed to create a meaningful life. (If the stressors are sufficiently traumatic, the time elapsed between the events and subsequent diagnosis and treatment make it less likely that a total erasure of symptoms will be possible. Most Vietnam PTSD sufferers require lifetime medication and continue to suffer symptoms of varying severity.)

The entertainers and Red Cross women were subjected to the same battlefield conditions, often going into the field to entertain or cheer up small groups of soldiers actually in combat. They travelled by plane, helicopter, Jeep, and truck. Perhaps the most famous of the entertainers, Cris Noel, travelled to Vietnam again and again at her own expense, forfeiting a promising career. Previously, she had been a rising star on the "A List," with ready access to any film or work she desired. After she returned from the battlefield, she found herself blackballed by anti-war Hollywood, her career in shambles.

The "Doughnut Dollies" angrily talk about the effects due to exposure to Agent Orange, and the fact that they have no access to specialist care since only VA doctors have any experience dealing with their condition, and only veterans of the military may utilize VA facilities. Other justifiable anger is expressed about the failure to include the names of the civilian women killed in Vietnam; it minimizes their contributions and sacrifices, making the loss of their lives even more futile.

Perhaps it is the ones who were not interviewed--possibly because they are dead from suicide, or too fragile or too angry to talk, or the author did not know how to find them--that are the saddest ones of all. This reviewer has met many such women, listened to their stories, and sorrowed over the destroyed lives of the women who went to Vietnam young and hopeful, and returned old and hopeless, and have never found their way home.

A notable lack of mention, with one vague exception, is any reference to the women who experienced sexual harassment, rape, and other violence perpetrated upon them while in Vietnam. There is one account of a murder, and the horrible lack of justice which ensued, but there is little evidence that many of the nurses, at least, were forced into things they did not want. Many Vietnam nurses tell of the forced attendance at the constant parties, the forced sex and resultant abortions as well as other outrages. One of the interviewees, Lily Adams, a well-known figure among veterans, who has influenced the Agent Orange issue, appears in a movie and talks about the devastating effects of the racism she encountered while in Vietnam. A petite Asian woman, she was often mistaken for a civilian prostitute when out of uniform, and harassed by the very men she had just tried to heal. This documentary, "Invisible Forces: Women In The Military," contains many stories of such events.

It is impossible to read *Women in Vietnam* without reliving those horrendous times for those of us old enough, and even those who have no personal experience with the war or the era will be moved by the unspeakable horrors and courage of these women. The book is highly recommended for anyone interested in reading what it was like to be in the middle of a war, trying to bring order and healing out of violence and chaos, and bleeding inside while having to put on a brave face. It is certainly recommended for academic use. Moreover, it should be read by those politicians who appear to take war lightly, at the same time dismissing veterans and their health care needs to the extent that the VA health care system is being gutted. Unable to care adequately for the current number of veterans requiring medical attention, the present war will serve to overload the grossly underfunded and understaffed VA system.

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From the September 10, 2003 edition



RECORDING MEMORIES:

Rachel Heine participates in the oral history project 'Telling Lives' at the New-York Historical Society.

MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN
- STAFF

Everyday history saved on tape

By [Gregory M. Lamb](#) | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

NEW YORK – Tell me about your first kiss. What was the neighborhood like that you grew up in? What was your happiest moment? What should the next generation know about our family?

Intriguing questions. The answers help form the history of a family. And every family has its own story. More and more, they're recording it for future generations. For years Americans have traced their genealogies. But the coming of the new millennium and life-changing events such as Sept. 11 have spurred new interest in gathering contemporary accounts from family members while they are still here to record them. Now two programs using 21st-century technology are making it easy for family members to record their stories.

"Telling Lives" is a pilot project of the American History Workshop, a consulting group founded by Richard Rabinowitz in 1980 to bring together historians, scholars, curators, filmmakers, artists, designers, and architects to find new ways of engaging citizens with history. It aims to create a North American databank of memories from 100,000 people.

The first location, at the New-York Historical Society through Sept. 24, is capturing people's stories about their early school experiences. The interest in the lives of North Americans - ordinary and extraordinary - has been growing, say Mr. Rabinowitz and others in the field. Biographies of both the famous and not-so-famous have become popular. "We're [still] interested in Ben Franklin or John Adams, but from a much more whole perspective," he says.

At "Telling Lives," visitors sit down at a computer terminal and record a 10-minute video about their early school days. They're prompted by a set of questions generated by the computer program, such as "I am (am not) the person I was in school." In a waiting area outside the recording cubicle, a videotape of previously recorded interviews primes the mental pump for visitors. On it, one woman recalls how she took grade school so seriously that she was disdainful of other girls who brought their dolls to the first day of school. Another remembers a student who paired up with a deaf girl to help her learn to read and in turn learned to read herself. Yet another adult tells of having a science project rejected because the teacher doubted the student had the ability to do it.

Eventually, Rabinowitz hopes to store the recordings at the University of Toronto so they can be easily searchable by topic. If the program wins funding to continue, he wants to explore other themes, such as family meals (which should reveal regional and ethnic differences), learning to drive (attitudes toward technology), and "my first job" (attitudes about work).

The lives of ordinary people

The "Telling Lives" project is "part of a larger cultural trend that says we're interested in diversifying the voices of the stories that are in museums, we're interested in the museum as a place of dialogue, we're interested in involving visitors as historians," Rabinowitz says. "In the last 25 years we've become much more interested in social history and the history of ordinary people." "It's very important for us to understand how important our own stories are and to celebrate and honour that," says David Isay, a public-radio documentary maker and the founder of StoryCorps.

Next month, this non-profit organization will install its first soundproof StoryBooth at Grand Central Terminal in New York. Aided by a facilitator, visitors will be able to record their personal histories on a 40-minute audio CD for a nominal fee. StoryCorps will retain a copy for its database and for possible use in making public radio documentaries. Mr. Isay (pronounced EYE-say) hopes to win funding to install StoryBooths around the country. For those unable to come to a booth, his organization will offer StoryKits for recording personal histories anywhere. They'll include a minidisc recorder, microphone, headphones, and instructions.

Today there's a "need for individuals to tell their own story, maybe because there's a need for it in a culture where mass media flattens out the contours of individuality," says Mary Marshall Clark, director of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University in New York. She notes that oral history is "unabashedly" about each person's unique identity: "It's about their gender, their culture, their colour, about their work." Recording of audio or video reminiscences has taken hold since the invention of the portable tape recorder. Perhaps the most famous example occurred in the 1930s when the federally funded Works Progress Administration hired 300 unemployed writers to interview about 2,300 former slaves. Those recordings have become an invaluable resource to researchers studying African-American history.

More recently, filmmaker Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation videotaped some 51,000 Holocaust survivors, who told of their experiences. And today, the Veterans History Project, sponsored by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, is in the process of collecting reminiscences from veterans of World War I through the 1991 Gulf War. Besides these large efforts, smaller projects have collected stories such as those of the Assiniboine Indians, passed along by those who watched the Lewis and Clark expedition cross Montana, and the *braceros*, Mexican immigrant farm workers who played a key role in America's food production during World War II. And all across the country, towns and historical societies have made individual efforts to capture the recollections of local citizens. "Telling Lives," funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the University of Toronto, will expand to other sites later this year in Hartford, Conn.; Atlanta; Los Angeles; and Toronto.

Technology makes it easy

Today, laptop computers with CD burners and DVD players, along with high-quality low-cost digital audio recorders, make it easy and cheap to capture and edit personal histories.

"My dream is that someday kids will be passing around MP3s [compressed music files] of the oral histories they've done, and put together with music or whatever," Isay says. "I think that would be amazing."

For Cathy Ogden, who heads an oral-history project for Greenwich, Conn., these reminiscences can provide gripping evidence of the past. The town has collected more than 700 recollections since 1973, producing 131 bound volumes of material. One of those accounts is from a man who recalls the 1938 hurricane that hit the town. He was only 14 at the time and walking near a seawall when a giant wave washed his friend off his feet. While the friend clung to a telephone pole, he managed to throw him a rope and rescue him. When listening to this story, Ms. Ogden says, "you just go right back to that scene" with that boy. Both Rabinowitz and Isay emphasize that they want to make "living" archives of people's lives that can and will be utilized and enjoyed. They don't want to, as Rabinowitz puts it, "wind up with a shoe box of tapes" that no one ever listens to.

"Each of us is uniquely a bridge to the past which would be lost if it were not for our history, our memory," he says. Each person "may be the only witness, the only connection" to some past event. Capturing those memories is "just tremendously important."

"We're all getting filled up with images generated by the media, and I'm very concerned that we are forgetting, we're just erasing a lot of history all the time," Rabinowitz adds. "We are in danger of losing a sense of who we are, and [are] adopting a kind of identity that really is rooted in stories that are generated by other people. It's a kind of 'Disney memory' people have, instead of their own memory. "The stories of ordinary people are more important and more interesting than the stories of celebrities," he says. "Certainly to the families themselves."

Want to create a great oral history? Here's how

You don't have to be a professional historian or researcher to record wonderful oral histories of your friends and family. But a few tips may make the experience more enjoyable and yield better results.

If you're interviewing someone you know well, for example, some special care is needed.

At first you may get very short answers or evasions such as "Why are you asking me that question? You know the answer" or "Just like I told you last time," says Mary Marshall Clark, director of the Oral-History Research Office at Columbia University.

In this situation, create a little formality by thinking of yourself as an "interested stranger," she suggests. Imagine you're recording for a grandchild two generations down the line who won't know the specifics of today's world. So don't be afraid to ask about the ordinary: Fifty years from now the price of a subway token or a ham sandwich will actually be interesting. Be sure to ask people how they felt about events, says David Isay, who makes documentaries for public radio and is founder of StoryCorps, a new nationwide oral history project. That will get them away from "the rehearsed narrative of their lives."

Other suggestions from Dr. Clark, Mr. Isay, and other oral historians include:

- Decide on your equipment and medium: An audio interview (on a tape recorder) may be less intimidating for the subject than speaking into a video camera. Highly recommended equipment includes headphones that allow you to hear how the interview is sounding and a separate microphone (clipped on or hand-held) that can be put near the mouth of the speaker.
- Try to learn about the person beforehand. Read about the times and places in which he or she lived.
- Bring along old family photos or letters to jog memories.
- A chronological approach makes for an easy format: Just begin at the beginning.
- Allow silences and take breaks if you're doing an extended session. Remember that the result may not be a tidy summing up of the person's life. Real lives are complex and "often there's no good end to a story," Clark says .
- Try to keep remarks tied to events the person witnessed firsthand rather than events he or she might have heard about secondhand.
- "Don't stay away from the tough stuff," Isay urges. He once interviewed his Uncle Sandy and asked him about the death of his wife. Afterward, his uncle was glad he'd spoken about it. "He said, 'It's good to be able to cry and talk about this stuff.' Telling the truth always feels good."

What questions to ask? The list is endless: Did you have a nickname growing up and why did you get it? How much money did you make on your first job? What were your grandparents like? How did you know that your spouse was "the one" to marry?

But remember that it's crucial to follow up with your own spontaneous questions, including "why?" Let the interview grow "organically," Isay says. "And you always follow the good stuff... When I'm doing an interview and something interesting happens, it's almost like you can see the sparks coming out of people's mouths." If you listen closely, listen with respect, and treat your subjects with dignity, he adds, "amazing things will happen."

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0910/p18s01-lifp.html>



Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA)

ABN 16 832 377 060

Membership of the OHAA includes a subscription to the Journal of the Association, published annually. There are branches of the Association in all Australian States. Northern Territory members are attached to the SA Branch and ACT members to NSW. Branches hold regular meetings, run workshops and publish regular newsletters, and also provide a friendly and informative forum for those interested in oral history from any perspective.

Membership Fees (1 July 2004 to 30 June 2005) (please tick the appropriate box)

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