

Electronic Currents

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The Iowa Labor History Oral Project: Managing Oral History Projects in the Digital Age

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In the 1970s, leaders of the Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, joined the rush of scholars, archivists, and everyday people into the burgeoning field of oral history. Like so many people then and since, they were excited by oral history's potential to document the lives of working-class people in ways previously extended only to the wealthy, politically connected, or producers of high culture. Today, the project they started—the Iowa Labor History Oral Project (ILHOP)—contains almost 1,500 interviews and counting, making it arguably the largest and longest-running worker-focused oral history project in the United States (and perhaps the world). Although ILHOP has changed considerably over the last 40 years, the project has retained a commitment to the long-term preservation of and access to specifically working-class stories as it has adapted to the challenges and opportunities of digital preservation, access, and workflows.

By most accounts, ILHOP was the brainchild of James Wengert, a former Sioux City packinghouse worker turned state legislator and labor leader. A widely recognized orator and storyteller who had risen to become president of the Iowa Federation of Labor (IFL), Wengert believed that workers' stories had value in and of themselves. Moreover, he saw that a project documenting Iowa workers' lives, labors, and political activities might help unify the labor movement at a time when labor was both expanding and attracting new and powerful opponents.

But, if ILHOP was Wengert's vision, it fell to many other people to make that vision a reality. By the mid-1970s, Wengert, together with his close friend and collaborator Mark Smith, a University of Iowa (UI) labor educator who had joined Wengert as an IFL officer, had provided funding for ILHOP through a dues assessment on union members, funding the project from the same workers who would be its focus. Next, they assembled an advisory board made up of labor leaders, professional historians, and educators from around the state. They established the director of the UI Labor Center as ILHOP's director to provide continuity and to connect the project to the university. At the same time, they also developed a relationship with the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI), which was tasked

with organizing, describing, preserving, and providing access to the tapes and transcripts.

The advisory board hired a former folksinger and folklorist, Paul Kelso, as ILHOP's first interviewer. They also established a collection process that would come to define the project for much of the next decade. They focused on Iowa's many small urban areas, such as Dubuque, which were also hubs of labor organizing. An advisory board member, often Smith, would contact local labor leaders and make arrangements for the ILHOP interviewer to be introduced to people who might be interested in being interviewed.

Between roughly 1977 and the early 1990s, this process produced approximately 1,100 interviews. In 1993, UI professor of history and long-time ILHOP advisory board member, Shelton Stromquist, used these interviews to write *Solidarity and Survival: An Oral History of Iowa Labor in the Twentieth Century*. Stromquist's book revealed many of the important insights into Iowa's working-class life unearthed by ILHOP interviewers. For example, he drew on interviews with coal miners in southeast Iowa to reveal the connections between unionized miners and the organization of manufacturers throughout the rural Midwest during the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, Iowa workers—even as early as the 1940s—were far more diverse than was often recognized before ILHOP. Skilled black workers had moved north and west as packinghouses and other businesses from major metropolitan centers opened new operations in rural areas, and communities of Mexicans and Mexican Americans came to Iowa to labor in sugar beet fields, on railroads, and in packinghouses.

Over time, ILHOP became an important resource for scholars of Iowa, midwestern, and labor and working-class history, especially among historians of meatpacking. Likewise, it was used by labor educators and by workers themselves as they shared stories from their past with new generations. To further expand the collection's potential, in 1999, ILHOP and its partners at SHSI were awarded a national leadership grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to produce and print an index to

approximately 760 of the interview transcripts. This index, published by SHSI in 2003, for the first time allowed researchers and other users to browse over 22,000 entries related to the lives and labor of Iowa workers and their communities.

also involved the development of new partners, especially the UI Libraries, which had heavily invested in digital methods over the previous decade. In 2015, the libraries and SHSI were awarded a one-year \$100,000 grant from

the National Historic Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) to digitize the collection, much of which was recorded on analog cassettes and reel-to-reel tape, and to make it publicly accessible through the UI Libraries’ Iowa Digital Library website. In 2017, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) awarded ILHOP an almost \$200,000 grant to complete transcriptions of existing interviews and to create an expandable, digital edition of the ILHOP index.

While this recent work has greatly expanded ILHOP’s reach and significance, it has also created new challenges for project management to address. For example, the issue of restricted interviews was addressed early on in the NHPRC

grant project. Over a hundred of the interviews are restricted from public access, most often because of an interviewee’s refusal to release his or her interview to the public. While these interviews are still restricted, their digitization and preservation were part of the grant terms. As the collection was being processed for mass digitization, restricted interviews were flagged and labeled as such.

Another problem lies in controlling a project that includes both physical and digital (both digitized and born-digital) assets. For example, the digital project librarian,

Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Notes
Anti-[ideology/movement]			
	in Iowa towns		
	in [city/town]		
Building, type of (i.e., barns)			
City/town			2003 Index organizes Iowa cities/towns alphabetically by name of city/town; non-Iowa cities/towns organized by state; recommend alphabetize all
	[decade]		
	[industry] factory		
	[park]		
	[prison]		
	[union] organizing, [decade]		
	baseball team		
	businesses and industries		
	churches		
	coal mines		
	gambling		
		[decade]	
	hotels		

Excerpt from the ILHOP index taxonomy, including notes toward revision of the master index

Although insecure funding slowed the project’s development during most of the 2000s, the founders’ instinct to locate the project in the Labor Center—an institution with both a broader and an overlapping mission—paid off. In 2013, Labor Center director Jennifer Sherer and a revived advisory board launched a bold new phase of the project. They hired a new oral historian who was tasked with conducting a new round of interviews to document the period since the 1960s and to bring the project into the digital age. This process

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following best practices, barcoded the reel-to-reel and cassette tapes from the pre-2013 collection. Because the limits of analog recording and project practice placed one interview on a single tape or multiple tapes devoted to a single interviewee, project staff could easily associate single analog objects with individual digital files. In the case of the born-digital collection, however, the ability (and cost-based need) to record multiple interviews on a single SD card have caused the problem of how to create a single database with the same metadata scheme for all items.

Other challenges have been presented by the effort to digitize and expand the 2003 index. As metadata is created for new interviews, whenever possible, librarians have followed the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). Unfortunately, the index and LCSH terms have grown insufficient for accurately describing the interviews as this project has grown over time. To address this, project staff have had to adopt a flexible system that follows aspects of the controlled vocabulary established in 2003 and LCSH to both revise the 2003 index and produce new headings. Critical to this process has been the development of a taxonomy of the 2003 index, which has allowed project staff to identify both patterns and inconsistencies.

Another challenge lies with the project itself and its scope. Even as ILHOP documented Iowa workers' diversity in its first round of interviews, approximately 90 percent of the initial interviewees remained white and male. Since 2013, with the support of new partners, project staff have collected approximately 200 born-digital interviews. These interviews include new generations of women, African American workers, and recent immigrants and refugees. These born-digital interviews are being ingested into the digital collection alongside digitized interviews, which has created some new challenges, especially when indexing interviews in which the interviewee's preferred language was not English.

As ILHOP moves toward its fiftieth year, the project continues to pursue its primary mission—preserving the stories of Iowa workers—while moving further to expand and diversify the workers involved. This has meant adapting a complex system of partnerships and processes to new organizational, financial, and technological changes. Although these adaptations make the ILHOP story unique, we hope that it might yet be useful to the MAC community and other archival professionals as an example of the importance of collaboration and adaptation in the

collection and preservation of and access to oral histories, especially those of working-class people.



ILHOP team members, past and present. Standing, left to right: Justin Baumgartner, John McKerley, Heidi Stofer, Mary Bennett, Ken Sagar, Jennifer Sherer, and Janet Weaver. Seated, left to right, Shelton Stromquist and Merle Davis.

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