American Folklore Society Consultancy Report
Georgia Wier, with Volunteer Staff of Kersey [Colorado] History Museum
Developing a Documentary Fieldwork Program (including Oral History)

For a AFS consultancy project held October 23-26, 2017, I led a workshop in folklore fieldwork and oral history methodology for the Kersey (Colorado) Historical Museum.

Kersey is a town located in Colorado’s eastern plains region with a population of about 1500. Volunteer staff members with the Kersey Museum are working hard to professionalize their collection development processes, exhibits, and programs. The four workshop participants all perform several other functions for the museum (and some hold other significant positions in the town as well). They recognized the value that a documentary fieldwork program, including an oral history collecting effort, would add to their museum.

I developed a series of worksheets and used those to organize our time working together. Worksheet titles were “Museum Project Planning and Archiving,” “Folklife Fieldwork and Ethics—Oral History and More,” “Oral History Basics, Interview Questions and Topics,” “Oral History Release Form” (draft for the museum to customize), “Bio Data Sheet” for interviewees, and “After the Interview.” In addition to the printed worksheets, which participants placed in a binder (they also received digital copies of any they requested), each received a print copy of the 2016 issue of Folklife & Fieldwork: An Introduction to Cultural Documentation, provided by the American Folklife Center. It was wonderful to have that revised version of the old familiar guide to leave as a “text” that workshop participants could keep for future use.

I started the workshop with definitions, skills, and procedures of conducting an oral history interview. All of the participants, who had been teachers or done other work involving communication, were quite familiar with concepts such as “open and closed questions” and “deep listening.” Also, everyone readily understood the idea that an interview was not a regular two-way conversation but instead an opportunity for one person to tell his/her story and express her/his thoughts and opinions. When offered the options of calling the person interviewed an “interviewee,” “narrator,” or “consultant,” they immediately chose the term “narrator” as their favorite (and they reacted with horror when I mentioned the antiquated term of “informant”).

In former oral history workshops, I had passed out lists of questions that could be used to elicit narration of an interviewee’s various life stages. However, I discovered that some people used those questions verbatim rather than following a more natural progression of topics. For this reason, during the Kersey workshop I simply brought up the idea of asking about a person’s childhood, early adulthood, etc., and workshop participants offered their own suggestions of what they might ask their narrators. Our primary discussion topic on the subject of interview questions concerned second-person accounts. As Kersey history buffs, the workshop
participants planned to ask descendants of the town’s founders what they remembered their elder relatives saying about events, buildings, and people in the town’s early days. Our conversation turned to the issue of oral history as a recording of memories, not necessarily of factual details.

Our workshop discussion on how to serve as folklore fieldworkers, not just oral history collectors, elicited ideas of groups of people whose stories had not yet been fully told. These included the occupants of Kersey’s “Spanish Colony,” a historic neighborhood that was occupied by Latino/a farm workers, and a relatively large population of Japanese American residents who first settled in Kersey when they arrived in Colorado. In thinking about creative expression, the workshop participants mentioned elaborate yard decorations constructed by a local resident for each holiday and an expression that all Coloradans use (“If you don’t like the weather, wait five minutes.”)

As with most groups with whom I have interacted on the topic of designing an oral history project, the Kersey group expressed their desire to interview elderly people in town before it was too late. While not wanting to dissuade them from this important mission, I encouraged them to also consider interviewing people who were not elderly. Our “Project Planning” workshop session consisted primarily of listing about 15 goals for the project and thinking about people (of any age) whose interviews might help address those goals. Interestingly, one goal was to include residents of Gill, a nearby small community whose existence has rarely been documented in any format. I left the group with the task of developing a final goal statement.

All discussions were lively and thought provoking, but as with most teaching the most valuable part of the workshop was probably the hands-on portion: the interview practice session. The group first divided into two pairs for one 30-minute interview session then switched partners for the next practice interviews. Everybody had the opportunity to serve as both the interviewer and the narrator. After this, the group reassembled to discuss what they had experienced as well as to practice logging an interview. One person mentioned how exhausting it was to be interviewed and said that he now understood the reason for limiting the time of an oral history interview.

After much debate, I decided to cover certain technological aspects of recording and to leave others for the workshop participants to explore on their own after our time together. Workshop attendees had varying degrees of experience with recording devices and with computers. I knew that one person had purchased a Tascam recorder for the workshop and that he had familiarized himself with its operation. I brought my own two recorders but ended up using only one. I introduced the concepts of recording in specific file formats (encouraging the use of .wav files when possible) and of renaming the interview sound files to include the narrator’s name. Workshop participants experienced downloading sound files to a computer and using those files to begin creating an interview log. One workshop pair also suffered the loss of a sound file during one of our practice workshop recordings; hopefully
this sad experience will be the last time that anyone in the group will lose a sound recording. Because some of the future interviewers hope to do video recording, we covered a few specific points about that (including the importance of using a tripod).

My pipedream for a fieldwork training session would be to bring several types of recording and photography equipment (including audio and video recorders and Iphones and Ipads used appropriately for interviewing purposes) to demonstrate the possibilities. However, for an introductory workshop I think that there is more value in establishing principles and learning skills that remain somewhat consistent over time than in getting bogged down with technology that can consume our minds and pocketbooks while constantly changing.

At the conclusion of the workshop, we discussed two related issues that we could not resolve during my time with them: the specifics of the release form and a completely satisfactory plan for archiving. I provided the Kersey group with a draft of a release form based on the one offered in *Folklife and Fieldwork*. Some of the participants expressed great concern over verbiage in this form related to internet use. We also discussed technical and personnel challenges related to providing proper storage and access for digital oral history recordings. Participants wanted to do the proper computer backups at the Kersey History Museum, but they also had interest in the idea of partnering with a larger archival institution. I promised the group that I would research these two issues further and report my findings to them later.

Through a conversation with Randy Williams, the Fife Folklore Archives Curator and oral history specialist at Utah State University, I learned more about the importance of small oral history groups’ finding qualified archival facilities to manage their new collections of interviews. It also became quite clear why the partnership should occur early in the interviewing process: the agreement between the interviewee and the collecting group should be one that can be upheld by the archive that will manage access to those interviews. I wish that I could have left Kersey with all decisions made and the trainees fully ready to launch their project. I had considered trying to broach the topics of release forms and archival challenges before I arrived; however, I’m glad that I waited because I believe that the group needed more general background in fieldwork and oral history before they could begin to contemplate difficult issues and make their own necessary decisions.

My main experiences conducting oral history workshops occurred during a 10-year period beginning in 1998. In preparing for the Kersey workshop I found that the materials available online had expanded greatly. I have folklorists Paddy Bowman and Jan Rosenberg to thank for pointing me in useful directions. Along with the great resources available on the Library of Congress website (including those for the Veterans History Project), the Oral History Association regularly updates its “Principles and Best Practices.” Louisiana Voices and the Southern Oral History Program also offer great online resources. A committed person anywhere can now locate the resources to train her/himself. However, the positive responses from those who took the workshop in Kersey made me feel that there still is value in the
face-to-face discussions and practice that occurs in a workshop setting.

**Workshop time expenditure notes:** The day before the workshop began, I met the organizer at the museum to check our set-up of equipment, etc. I used a fourth day as a make-up for a participant who missed a previous session. The time required for this workshop without these additions would be two 5-hour days (with a break for lunch) and one 3-hour day.