

Student Opportunities for Academic Research. A Proposal for the Summer of 2017

- SOAR Research Proposal for Christopher Brennan, Summer 2017.
- Heikki Lempa's Curriculum Vitae

SOAR Research Proposal, Summer 2017

Oral History: Methodology and Tool for Moravian Biographies

Mentor: Heikki Lempa, Professor, Department of History

SOAR Scholar: Christopher Brennan

Project: May 29 - August 4, 2017

Christopher Brennan's SOAR project explores oral history as a methodology and a tool in creating and collecting biographies of members of Moravian college. Since the 1960s oral history has emerged as an important methodology in writing contemporary history. It has also empowered communities to embrace and write their own histories through the individual voices of their members from bottom up. Chris Brennan will reconstruct the development of oral history as a methodology and tool of community-based history since the 1940s. He will also apply this tool to four cases by having an oral history interview with an alumna/us, emerita/us professor, retired administrator, and retired staff member. The methodological study would establish the appropriate approaches and techniques, including but not limited to preparatory work, appropriate interview questions, the questions related to the Institutional Review Board (HSIRB), interview techniques and technology, transcription, display and preservation. The case studies would be the first applications of these approaches and techniques. The emphasis of Chris Brennan's project will be in the interview itself, the HSIRB process, and transcription.

In the following we will first outline the larger project of Heikki Lempa. Second, we will go into Chris Brennan's proposal and its contribution to the overall project. Third, we will detail Chris's qualifications for the project. Finally, we will give a detailed schedule for our research.

Heikki Lempa's Project

Chris Brennan's project is related to my larger project of creating an oral history of Moravian College. The project has two parts. It will, first, include oral biographies of Moravian alumni, emeriti professors, and retired administrators and staff members. Second, I will create a platform for conducting and preserving oral history interviews of Moravian College community members for years to come. This is a project that I will undertake during my prospective sabbatical year, 2018-2019. I have been interested in oral history since my college years. My interest in Moravian history goes back to my earlier work on the history of German education. Especially in the book, *Bildung der Triebe. Der deutsche Philanthropismus (1768-1788)*, I came across the work of Comenius and Zinzendorf. In fact, the knowledge of these educational thinkers was an important way for me to connect with the Moravians when I started here in 2001. During my tenure at Moravian I have engaged the history of Moravian College and Moravians in multiple

ways. With Jim Skalnik I organized a study group on Moravian educational history and heritage in 2004. In 2006, Paul Peucker and I started the Conference on Moravian History which, in 2008, merged with the Conference on Moravian Music and has drawn to Bethlehem scholars of Moravian history and music from all over the world. As the book review editor of the *Journal of Moravian History* (Penn State Press), I have become keenly acquainted with the current research on Moravians. To develop a comprehensive oral history project is an organic outgrowth from these earlier experiences. This project of Moravian biographies grows also from the long Moravian tradition of memoirs. In the eighteenth century, Moravians started to collect memoirs, *Lebensläufe*, of each member of the community. The Moravian Archives has more than 15,000 memoirs. There are estimately 65,000 Moravian memoirs preserved globally.

Oral history is a technique of collecting historical data comparable with data collection techniques in social sciences. But oral history is also a way of empowering a community to “write its own history,” to engage that history as a living memory. The benefits of this project are immediately recognizable. It helps us know us and know each other. It will empower, encourage, and enable us to eventually write a comprehensive history of this institution beyond what John Weinlick and others have pieced together. It is not my goal to write this history. But the oral history project will create a platform and procedures of collecting Moravian biographies, which can serve as an important source to write a new history of Moravian College. Similar projects have been undertaken at other institutions, for instance University of Wisconsin, Madison: <https://www.library.wisc.edu/archives/archives/oral-history-program/>

To create a useful platform for a sustainable collection of oral history interviews or biographies following procedures have to be considered: a protocol of oral interviews, the application of permissions from the Institutional Review Board, the control of the integrity of the work, transcription, preservation, digitization, and display.

Chris Brennan’s Project

Oral history is an old approach in reconstructing history used by traditional communities for thousands of years. As a systematic methodology of writing history it was a forgotten art until the aftermath of World War II when historians rediscovered oral history as a valuable approach in writing history. In 1948, Allan Nevins, Professor of History at Columbia University, embarked on his research on elites by using portable tape recorder in interviewing his subjects. In the 1950s and 1960s, oral history continued to grow and spread, among others, to Britain. Oral history was now seen as an essential tool to record “bottom-up” history of working people and minorities because of their lack of historical documents. In the 1970s, oral history was contested by critics who claimed that a person’s memory could not be seen as a reliable historical source, due to the biases and manipulations of the interlocutor. Paul Thompson was the leader in challenging these critics when he published his *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* in 1978. He argued that oral history was only partially a means of providing documentation but mainly a tool

of providing people with a voice. Oral history developed now into a methodology that allowed people to create their own histories rather than hide them or letting others write them.

In the 1980s and 1990s the oral history community refined its tools by rethinking the relationship between the interviewer and interlocutor. In the 1997 issue of the *Oral History Review*, Valerie Yow argued that the interviewers had to keep an open mind while interviewing but could not allow that open mindedness distract from their own argument. Yow posed seven questions that became the framework for many oral historians helping them recognize their subjectivity, while not affecting their objectivity.

In the beginning of the 2000s, a major technological change gave oral history a new direction. New electronic devices, internet, and advanced online databases brought about a constantly changing and evolving forms of recording and sharing oral histories globally. The internet has made oral histories accessible to those who know what to search for. I am planning to use this methodology in four cases studies. An important step towards a good, effective oral history is to have a good grasp and understanding of the history of the time and institutions of the interlocutors.

I am currently working on a paper in Dr. Berger's Lehigh Valley history course that is focused on the college during the 1940s. Unfortunately there is not much research on Moravian College in the twentieth century, especially after the merge of the men's and women's college in 1954. My best source has been John Weinlick's *Twentieth Century Moravian College: Challenge and Response*. During the four decades after the merger Moravian college expanded in terms of student population and faculty. By the 1960s, it had become a respected small liberal arts college in not only Pennsylvania, but also throughout the Northeast.

My SOAR project has three goals:

1. To reconstruct the history of oral history as a methodology.
2. To apply oral history methodology to four cases studies.
3. To help create a template for oral history biographies that can be used to conduct accurately and effectively oral histories with Moravian College alumni, emeriti, and retired staff members.

Bibliography

- Blatz, Perry K. "Craftsmanship and Flexibility in Oral History: A Pluralistic Approach to Methodology and Theory," *The Public Historian* 12, no. 4, 1990.
- Frisch, Michael, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.

- Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History A Practical Guide*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
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- Thomson, Alistair. “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History” *The Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2007): 49-70.
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Schedule

1. Reconstructing the History of Oral History, IRB, May 29 - June 9, 2017
2. Preparing for the Interviews, Questions, June 12 - 16, 2017
3. Interviews, June 19 - 30, 2017
4. Transcribing the Interviews, July 3 - 14, 2017
5. Writing the Final Report, July 17 - August, 4, 2017

Budget

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Living costs for Chris Brennan | \$3,000 |
| 2. Travel costs to the interlocutors | \$400 |
| 3. Total | \$3,400 |

Student Opportunities for Academic Research. Student Statement of Purpose

- SOAR Research Proposal for Christopher Brennan, Summer 2017.

SOAR Research Proposal, Summer 2017

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For this project, I bring an in-depth knowledge of not only the historiography of oral history but also the history of Moravian College. One of the keys to successfully interacting with the interlocutors is to already have a grasp of the subject at hand, which I have gained from the work for Dr. Berger's class. I have an increasing understanding in both of these fields. The outcome of this project will be a template for conducting oral history interviews with Moravian alumni, emeriti, and retired staff members. In an ideal case any person or group of people that are aspiring to organize their own oral history projects can potentially look at my strategies.

This project will teach me the correct, as well as the most economical way to conduct research and also set a model for specific oral history projects. It will teach me how to locate interlocutors, how to find reliable scholarly sources for the preliminary research, how to conduct the interview, how to transcribe the interviews. The biggest takeaway from this project is being able to draw more research on the topic as well as giving me the opportunity to work hands-on with oral history, an approach and a school of historical thinking, that I find particularly interesting.

Conducting this SOAR project will open doors for me to present my findings. I am planning to present at Moravian College History Club's Tuesday Talks in the fall 2017 and at the NCUR in the spring of 2018 as well as Student Scholarship Day in April of 2018. Besides these traditional venues I am interested in reaching out to the President of Moravian College, the Institutional Advancement Office, and the Provost to discuss the ways the oral history interviews could be done to write our own history. This project will also be beneficial towards an honors project because it will teach me a wide variety of research skills, how to analyze data and properly publish findings. I hope to be able to publish my findings in an undergraduate history journal, such as *History Matters: An Undergraduate Journal of Historical Research* or *Columbia Undergraduate Journal of History*. I am also planning to pursue graduate studies in public history in which oral history is an important method of conducting research and collecting materials.

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