# Descriptive Metadata for Oral History: What is Important to Know?

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**Abstract:** First-hand stories help us to understand the meaning, the individual consequence of events and information; oral sources reveal multiple "truths" that coexist in historical inquiry. For archivists and librarians, oral-historical information affords unique potential: patrons see a reason to be supportive when their recorded history is part of the institution; and, with the addition of audio files, the library/archive invites a range of promotional, programming, collaborative, and creative opportunities. Even so, challenges associated with oral-history management dissuade institutions from pursuing collections—and those that do work with interviews face headaches or outright barriers when trying to make the content discoverable. The inability to effectively deal with this information is not without consequence: In an August 2010 report, "The State of Recorded Sound Preservation in the United States," the National Recording Preservation Board revealed that community groups surrounding repositories have the impression that an institutional donation makes their material *less* accessible, like sending it into a "black hole."

This poster presentation explores the need and utility for a metadata set specific to oral history. The focus is descriptive metadata, information that would help researchers to understand the content and character of an oral-history interview—the central question being: *What is important to know?* Preservation is meaningless if researchers can't find what they are looking for – meaningless if they find "insufficient specific information" to know what they've discovered. The idea for a descriptive "Oral History Core" hinges on participation from interviewers, interviewees, researchers, and curators. A convening of diverse perspectives might land upon data points that uniformly reflect the nature of a person and his/her story. These data points would be the core set of descriptive information that populates a catalog record and helps to make the interview fully accessible: discoverable, retrievable, *and* contextualized.

**About the author:**

*Cyns Nelson*, MLS, is project manager for the Colorado Voice Preserve initiative (www.voicepreserve.org), a multidisciplinary collaboration to establish a statewide oral-history infrastructure and library. Cyns specializes in oral-history creation, collection development, and management for libraries and archives. She has led workshops for the Colorado Library Consortium; guest lectured for San Jose State University's School of Library and Information Science; worked on oral-history based exhibits for the CO Historical Society; and regularly speaks on oral-history issues at regional and national library/archive conferences.

Cyns is passionate about making oral history prevalent and pertinent to our world of information; making interviews salient, accessible, and available into the foreseeable future. This passion fuels a research agenda focused on descriptive metadata for oral history, tackling the "aboutness" of an interview. This area has not systematically been addressed for oral history and requires distinct

consideration, to correlate narrative content with other types of information. She can be reached by email at [cynsnelson@voicepreserve.org](mailto:cynsnelson@voicepreserve.org).