Michigan Oral History Association
Keynote Address
September 25, 2009

Thank you to Geneva and organizers of the Michigan Oral History Association

meeting. It is good to be here.

I've long known of the work of Geneva and MOHA. Your work is an example for

all of us. Coming from Minnesota, which lost its OHAM a couple of years ago, it is good

to see a thriving state oral history organization.

I started doing oral history in the late 1970s when, as a graduate student at the

University of Minnesota-Duluth, I received a grant to record the stories of commercial

fishermen on the North Shore of Lake Superior. I think I was the third person to do this –

Helen White and Lila Goff preceded me. With support from Sea Grant (UMD is a sea

grant, not a land grant, institution), I researched content and context, did the interviews,

transcribed them, arranged to have them deposited them at the Northeast Minnesota

Historical Center at UMD, and used them to develop a public program. I understand the

interviews still are regularly used at the Center. For a while, I was asked to present the

program in Duluth and along the North Shore. There were many audiences, but I

remember one in particular. It was a group of third graders from a school in what would

have been called a deprived area. The teacher asked me to give the program but was a

little nervous about how the kids would respond to a history show. I was, too. But they

were fascinated. They heard stories about what it was like to live along the North Shore

of Lake Superior before there was a road north from Duluth and the only way to get

groceries and mail was by "mosquito boats," the little boats that darted up and down the shore, stopping at each bay or inlet to take grocery orders and make grocery and mail deliveries. They heard fishing technique stories about making and repairing nets, about going out on the lake to set or put out nets in all kinds of weather, about the kinds of fish that were caught and when, about the boats the fishermen used, and about working all night, after fishing for long hours, to salt the fish so it could be preserved for sale in places like Chicago and New York. They heard stories of danger - of being out on the lake when storms came up and how fishermen, rather than trying to beat a storm to shore, would sometimes tie themselves in their boats to ride it out – not always successfully. And they heard about commercial fishing around Isle Royale during the summer. They heard the same ~30-minute show that I presented to adults, listened to everything, and asked good questions. They were one of the best audiences I remember speaking to.

I've thought about that experience since then. Those little kids responded to the stories of the lake as told through oral histories. They heard first-person history about a place they knew and they loved it. This is only one of many examples of the power of the stories we collect through oral history interviews. But it helps us think about the importance of oral history in our communities.

What is oral history? Or I should ask what do you think of when you hear the term? Generally people think of first-person, spoken stories about the past. Oral history often is described as a generic, imprecise term that can have a big tent meaning. It can encompass a wide range of personal experience stories. Some people think of it as a brand that can be applied to a variety of types of interviews. Many oral history practitioners, however, use a more specific definition that focuses on process and

product: **Oral history is primary source material collected in an interview setting with a witness to or a participant in an event or a way of life for the purpose of preserving the information and making it available to others. The term refers both to the process and the final product.**[1]

Since the organization of the first oral history program in the United States at Columbia University in 1948, oral history practitioners have developed a structured methodology for collecting information about the past. This methodology is based on several **key elements**:

- Careful attention to copyright and other legal and ethical issues

- A structured, well-researched interview format

- Probing follow-up questions that seek depth and detail

- A controlled, recorded interview setting

- Collection of first-hand information

- Use of high-quality recording equipment

- Adherence to careful processing techniques

- Provisions for making interviews available to others at an accessible repository[2]

We're all familiar with these key elements. They define oral history as something more than a discussion about the past. Oral historian Willa Baum summed up the importance of oral history methodology when she said, "The goal is a good historical account, first-hand, preserved, and available."[3]

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[1] Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual,* 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2009):1.
[2] Sommer and Quinlan, *Oral History Manual*:1.
[3] Willa Baum, "The Other Uses of Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 34:1 (Winter/Spring 2007):15.

The importance of this statement is reflected in four **paradigm changes** that define our current understanding of the practice of oral history. As noted by Alistair Thomson, author, with Rob Perks, of *The Oral History Reader,* in a 2007 issue of *The Oral History Review,* they include:

- Increased understanding of the importance of memory as "people's history"

- Clarification of an understanding of the "subjectivity" of memory

- Discussion about the role of the oral historian as interviewer

- The impact of technology and the digital revolution[4]

Each of these developments has affected, in some way, how we think about and do oral history. The first, increased understanding of the importance of memory as "peoples' history," has helped change the content and writing of history. Interview information helps us understand history from the bottom up as well as the top down.

Oral historians have always worked with memory, but an understanding of the subjectivity of memory is the subject of Alistair Thomson's second point. Rather than a weakness, as was considered some years ago, working with memory is now seen as a strength. To quote Alistair Thomson, an oral history interview not only helps document an historical experience or event, it contains information about "relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory."[5]

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[4] Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History" in *The Oral History Review*, volume 34, number 1, winter/spring 2007:49-70.
[5] Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History:"54.

The third major change Thomson identified, understanding the role of the interviewer in the interview, has been much discussed over the years. In many ways, the role of the interviewer has remained constant – interviewers understand the ethics of an oral history interview, prepare carefully for an interview by doing the background research that grounds them in the interview topics, learn and follow interviewing techniques in designing and asking questions, remain neutral, and, when designing or helping design a project, strive to include narrators who represent all perspectives of interview topics .

Questions about clarifying the role of the oral historian as interviewer began in the 1970s and 1980s over empowerment issues and concerns that an interviewer could unduly influence a narrator and, thus, interview content. Oral historians increasingly are sensitive to "shared authority" between interviewer and narrator, the subjective nature of oral history, and the importance of carefully exploring the meanings of information given in an interview. [6] As Alex Freund, a leader of the Canadian Oral History Association recently described the interaction between narrator and interviewer, "oral histories are not just sources to be mined for data but [are] complex social constructs that are inherently subjective and offer multiple layers of meaning."[7]

One only has to read postings on the oral history listserv to become aware of the impact of the digital revolution, the fourth major change that Thomson identified. Oral history always has been a technology-based research methodology. The digital revolution

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[6] Michael A. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral History and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). Alex Freund, "Oral History as Process-generated Data, http://blog.uwinnipeg.ca/alexander-freund/2009%20Freund%20OH%20Process%20Generated%20Data%20HSR%2034.1.pdf, accessed September 1, 2009.
[7] Freund, "Oral History as Process-generated Data":23.

has brought this discussion even more to the forefront. Thomson's fourth change reminds us to continue to use high-quality recording equipment to maximize short-term use and long-term accessibility to the interview. It also has prompted some to ask: with digital technology and the possibilities it offers for access to recordings, do we need transcripts? (I don't agree.) The newly organized technology section on the Oral History Association Web site, managed by Doug Boyd, Director of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky, should be a helpful resource for these constantly moving targets. http://www.oralhistory.org/technology

The eight key elements and the four paradigm changes bring us to oral history as we practice it today. The key elements are the methodological base; the paradigm changes are the refinements in theory that have taken place over the years.

When Mary Kay Quinlan and I wrote *The Oral History Manual,* first edition, in 1999, a reviewer said that it helped people "think like an oral historian." I thought this was a catchy line at first, then I realized the reviewer was reminding us that thinking like an oral historian is what we do. We do not think like interviewers; we think like oral historians. Whether academic or community-based, oral history practitioners are encouraged to think like oral historians.

What does it mean to think like an oral historian? In addition to understanding key elements and paradigm changes, it means oral history practitioners think analytically about oral history communities and their importance to oral history process and methodology. It means we don't skip or short-change the sometimes laborious research and planning that goes into developing an oral history project. We think carefully about the full oral history process as a base of support for the interview. We think carefully

about content and, as importantly, context of interview information, documenting what was collected and why and how and when and where. We apply oral history planning methodology to everything from project definition to narrator choice to saving interview information in a repository. We think about answering such questions as:

- Why are we doing this oral history project?

- Why are we designing this oral history project as we are?

- Why, among all the people in the community of shared interests and knowledge, are we asking these narrators to be a part of it?

- Why are we pairing these interviewers with these narrators?

- Why are we asking these questions and why are we asking (or not asking) these follow-up questions?

- What impact could the types of funding sources have on the project – if any?

- What impact could the project outcomes, such as the expected design and/or deadlines of films or exhibits, have on the project – if any?

- "What background can we give future users (who will increasingly have no contact with anything but the interview information) when they ask: why did this particular narrator make this particular statement at this particular time and place?" (Alex Freund)

Although his discussion of the paradigm changes is helpful, Thomson makes one statement in his article that is too broad. Describing ongoing concerns that trouble some oral historians, he suggests that the "increasing theoretical sophistication of academic oral history is incomprehensible to, or ignored by, oral historians outside the academy, for

example, those working in schools, community projects and the media."[8] This statement assumes that community-based oral historians do not have access to or knowledge about up-to-date information. This is not the case. Oral historians in academic settings and in community-based settings run the gamut of training and understanding of methodology. And organizations like MOHA provide oral history practitioners, academic and community-based, with up-to-date information through regular training sessions, meetings such as this one, and opportunities for networking.

In fact, community-based oral history, always an important part of the oral history world, has exploded in recent years. Increased information about oral history, access to sophisticated digital equipment (impact of the digital revolution), and an awareness of the importance of grassroots history (the importance of memory as "people's history") have contributed to this growth.

When doing oral history, who are our communities? A general definition of community is a group of people with something in common. I can think of three basic oral history communities:

- A community of oral history practitioners
- A community of shared interests and knowledge (also called a community of memory, 9/7/2010) – people, often in a specific location or in physical proximity, with first-hand information about an event or a way of life
- A community of researchers/users

. Who or what are each of these? The community of oral history practitioners is a group of people who know, understand, and apply the methodology. They are the people

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[8] Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History:"56-7.

who share common professional interests even if scattered through the larger society. They develop and attend training sessions. They know and understand how to use oral history methodology to achieve the goal described by Willa Baum.

What about the community of shared interests and knowledge (community of memory)? These are the communities whose voices, through our narrators, we add to the historical record. They often are defined by physical proximity (specific location) along with interest in and knowledge about an identifiable theme. Oral history theory and methodology is developed for the community of practitioners, but it defines and guides the relationship between practitioners and this community.

Having published the *American Indian Oral History Manual* with Charles E. Trimble and Mary Kay Quinlan last year, I'll draw from it to provide one example of thinking like an oral historian when working with a community of shared interests and knowledge. Many oral historians cite American Indian communities as leaders in this process because of the heritage of orality – and leaders they are. But then when we mention American Indian oral history, practitioners often refer to oral traditions – the shared interests or knowledge - as a static block of information. Actually oral traditions include a variety of types of oral information.[9] For example, we can identify:

- sacred and epic stories. These often are passed down as literally as possible with protocols that help determine when and how they should be told. Many contain information that defines and describes particular Indian

[9] Writing in 1970, Ruth Finnegan suggested oral traditions be analyzed by function and use when citing as sources. Ruth Finnegan, "A Note on Oral Tradition and Historical Evidence" in David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology,* 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996):126-134. Jan Vansina describes oral traditions based on modes of transmission before analyzing their use as evidence. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985):14-27.

cultures. They are "encoded with spiritual and ritual elements that need to be acknowledged and respected for what they are," as archeologists T.J. Ferguson and Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh recently wrote.[10] They regularly are described as metaphors or parables for teaching culture and values.

- community stories, another type of oral account, can appear to contain identifiable historical content. The Oneida story about the creation of the Five Nations Confederacy or Great League is example. This story contains details that seem to define a specific time ("when the corn was ripe and the grass was knee high") and a specific event (when the "sun went dark during the day" – a solar eclipse) that could date the origin of the Confederacy. It continues to be told by Wisconsin Oneida today.

- family stories, another type of oral communication about the past, describe events remembered and handed down by families. The role of family stories is an area of increasing interest in documenting and interpreting the past. It can show us the people and places who "shaped our parents and their parents, making us see ourselves, too, as actors in an immediate, lived history." The history often is contained in stories that "join the individual and the universal."[11]

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[10] T.J. Ferguson and Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, *History is in the Land: Multivocal Traditions in the San Pedro Valley* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2006):247.
[11] Amato, *Jacob's Well,* ix, 126.

- first-person memories, another type of oral information, seems to be the closest to oral history?[12] The interviews in The [Wisconsin] Oneida Ethnological Study [WPA Project no. 9476], which ran from October 1940 through March 1942, for example, contain many first-person accounts. Responding to questions from Oneida interviewers, the narrators described their personal histories and their people's history after Oneida removal to Wisconsin. The narrator's information covered the years prior to the 1887 Dawes Allotment Act through World War I, the Great Depression, and the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (Wheeler-Howard Act or Indian New Deal). Much of this is first-person information about 20th-century American history from the Oneida perspective.

This discussion, one way of looking at complex information in a community of shared interests and knowledge, is an example of how we can carefully think about how to collect oral information while respectfully thinking like oral historians. It also helps us understand the complexity of documenting history documented from the "bottom up" and giving voice to those who often are voiceless in the historical record, of working with narrators to communicate information within appropriate context, and of documenting the oral history process as completely as possible.

Back to our communities, along with the community of oral history practitioners and the community of shared interests and knowledge (community of memory), the third community is the community of people who use oral history materials. The community of researchers and users is growing and changing as people with no connection to an oral

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[12] Jan Vansina defines oral traditions as "verbal messages…from the past beyond the present generation." This definition precludes first-person statements. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985):27.

history project or a set of life interviews are increasingly using the interview information. This community also can serve as a reminder of the importance of repositories. Understanding the need for long-term care of and access to oral history collections is basic to the work of oral historians. It, however, is a subjective statement and is not made easier by budget cuts. In Minnesota, for example, library and reference room staff and hours are being cut. Michigan has seen the break-up of the Michigan Department of History, Arts, and Libraries into various entities including the Archives of Michigan. Support for state archives and archival collections is critical to ongoing access to oral history information. Many of us in Minnesota have followed the news from Michigan with concern; we all support your historical organization and hope that funders do the same.

Thomson's point about community-based projects does call attention to one area of concern, however. There aren't many materials that focus specifically on support for community-based oral history projects. Realizing that, Nancy MacKay (thank to Nancy MacKay and Mitch Allen), Mary Kay Quinlan, and I are under contract with Mitch Allen and Left Coast Press, Inc. to develop a community-based oral history toolkit. By community-based oral history projects, we mean projects that are developed by, and based in, the complex communities of shared interests and knowledge. These are the school and community projects that Alistair Thomson referred to. Oral history practitioners from all backgrounds work with communities, but it is the community-based projects that are growing in number and sophistication and that we are focusing on with this publication, which is due out in 2012.

Examples of community-based oral history projects are everywhere. Here in Michigan they include:

- Italians in Michigan's Upper Penninsula, Dr. Russell Magnaghi – deposited in Northern Michigan Archives, used in dissertation on Piedmontese Italians in the world

- Mackinac Bridge Oral History Project, Geneva Wiskemann – deposited in Archives of Michigan

- "Your Story and Mine: A Community of Hope," a project that included development of a traveling exhibit developed by Advent House Ministries in collaboration with the Michigan Historical Museum, Martha Aladjem Bloomfield

- A project that included public presentations based on interview information from the Leadership Interviews – Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, Sharon Alterman

- *The Gift of All: A Community of Givers* produced by S.O.U.L. (Sharing Our Uncommon Legacy) of Philanthropy – 55-minute video initiated by oral historians, writers, and filmmakers that describes the culture of philanthropy in the Grand Rapids area communities and is now being used to teach others, including school students, MOHA President Gordon Olson, Geneva Wiskemann, and S.O.U.L. of Philanthropy

Even though we have a common oral history base as a community of practitioners, there are specific attributes that define community-based projects. In our toolkit proposal, Nancy, Mary Kay, and I defined them as:

- Lack of support from an academic institution

- Often organized around a festival, exhibit, performance, or publication

- Driven by grant cycles and deadlines with the need to achieve a specific goal within a limited timeframe

- Carried out by volunteers, sometimes working with one paid staff person

- More often are organized as oral history projects than life histories with individual community members

- Often partner with local businesses or others in the community to help provide technical expertise and supplies

- Can lack infrastructure, such as office space, storage space, and computer equipment

- Almost always have limited funds

In other words, the differences are not so much in methodology as in goals or outcomes and basic support and funding.

Nancy, Mary Kay and I also decided it would be helpful to define the characteristics of successful community-based oral history projects. To help us, we sent questionnaires to a number of people. Many of you here tonight answered. Here is a summary of the responses from projects throughout the country. Successful community-based projects illustrate how to think like an oral historian in the following ways:

- attend to basic organizing needs such as naming a project and developing a mission statement that answers the question – "What do we want to accomplish?"

- plan for management from the outset, identifying personnel, including a leader or coordinator and interviewers, as well as infrastructure, proposed size and timeline

- understand oral history methodology and the difference between thinking like an interviewer and thinking like an oral historian

- identify leaders in the community of shared interests and knowledge who can provide support, help identify a narrator pool, provide other project-specific needs

- understand and respect all sides of the history of their community of shared interests and knowledge

- think analytically about project content and context, documenting how both were defined

- don't necessarily identify all their narrators at the outset; this can be an ongoing process based on in-depth research and accumulated knowledge

- understand the importance of documenting the oral history process so that the community of users can make sense both of interviews and the collection (listserv comment, 9/15/2009)

- choose equipment carefully but do not let equipment decisions run the project

- understand the need for legal release forms and take care to develop forms that fit the project's and the repository's needs while meeting oral history standards

- see to long term care of the interview materials by contacting and working with a repository early in the planning process

- plan to save the recordings in several formats and in several locations – this can include making a transcript for user access and to protect against possible future loss of the recording

- include a plan for transcribing (or sometimes their leaders realize the need to transcribe after they get underway)

- train their interviewers

- don't necessarily need a lot of money to succeed (though funding always is welcome)

In other words, successful community-based oral history project leaders know and apply oral history methodology in communities of shared interests and knowledge working within the structure of community-based criteria and goals.

Survey comments about project planning and management give us further examples of how project managers think like oral historians within community-based project structures. Here are some excerpts.

Many respondents provided specific comments about **project planning**:

The time and effort that went into planning—forming a committee, hashing out details, developing protocols, establishing a framework—allowed the project to expand in ways that couldn't be foreseen: incorporating additional voices and volunteers, obtaining grants, developing publicity and programs, etc. Cyns Nelson/Susan Becker, From Secrecy to Accessibility: The Rocky Flats (CO) Nuclear Weapons Plant Oral Histories

[P]lanning issues involved choosing narrators, insuring a balance of viewpoints, deciding on big areas of interest on which to base questions, formulating a list of broad questions for each group of participants (such as plant workers, regulators, protesters), obtaining funding to augment both volunteer work and work funded by the Maria Rogers Oral History Program, and working out transcription conventions. Dorothy Ciarlo/Susan Becker, From Secrecy to Accessibility: The Rocky Flats (CO) Nuclear Weapons Plant Oral Histories

Hiring a consultant was crucial to the early success of the Project. The Project grew very fast in the first year or two, and the consultant, who apparently advised on all aspects of the organization, was critical in making the Project a more professional one. Catherine H. (Cathy) Ogden, Greenwich (CT) Library Oral History Project

All planning steps are necessary… Sample documents are very helpful, especially consent forms. We gathered such forms from a variety of sources. We created our own manual after the completion of Phase 1 so there would be a guide for future teams to follow. Angela Zusman, Oakland (CA) Chinatown Oral History Project

Comments about working with **repositories** include the following:

The [project] had originally planned to archive its own interviews, but had not gotten very far in the process and had little expertise in the area. Once the … oral history committee became aware of the extensive archives already in existence at the MROHP, [Maria Rogers Oral History Project] and the program's willingness to collaborate … in archiving oral histories collected by its interviewers, we moved quickly to reach an agreement to have the MROHP archive the interviews collected under the auspices of the museum. The relationship has been extremely fruitful—in all likelihood, we would still be

trying to locate the funding and expertise to archive our interviews online and the public would have very little access to the information. The collaboration with the MROHP has allowed tremendous public access to our interviews, and helped to raise the profile of the museum and the oral history project. Hannah Nordhaus/Susan Becker, From Secrecy to Accessibility: The Rocky Flats (CO) Nuclear Weapons Plant Oral Histories

Survey responders commented on knowing and working with the community of shared interests and knowledge. Stephen Sloan, Director of the Baylor Oral History Program, provided a little bit of background for this at the 2009 Wisconsin Oral History Day when he described what he called project or community ally roles. These are:

- The Gatekeeper. This person is a community leader who understands the project and advocates for it. This may be the first person interviewed.

- The Translator. This person helps communicate the project to the community.

- The Energizer. This person is more passionate about the project than anyone else, willing to go above and beyond to make it succeed.

Community allies can be one person or more than one person. This questionnaire comment illustrates their importance:

The project was spearheaded by Dr. Dan Mazzuchi who firmly believes in the process and worked with the hospital CEO. This was critical. Dr. Russell M. Magnaghi, Marquette (MI) General Health Services

Survey responders commented on **interviewer training**:

Which planning step was most helpful? *Training in oral history techniques.* Janet Tanner, El Toro (CA) Marine Corps Air Station Oral History Project

In addition to the museum staff person/consultant, we also had Geneva Wiskemann, Michigan Oral History Association, conduct an oral history interviewing workshop with our whole team. The interviewers also practiced interviewing each other before conducting interviews with the participants to get a better sense of the questions we were asking and what kinds of questions might be most effective. Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, Your Story and Mine: A Community of Hope (MI)

Processing comments included some that said, after the project got going, project directors or leaders added **transcribing**. Another responder said:

The most costly item in our budget is transcription at a flat rate of $40 per oral history. Lynette Stoudt and Kaye Kole, Savannah (GA) Jewish Archives Oral Histories

Summary thoughts and comments include:

Doing an oral history project of this nature was full of many "peaks and valleys." I learned that it takes lots of dedication, passion, time and commitment and support to see it thru to completion, but the final product made all the work worth it! Luisa Miranda and Arthur Ramirez, Azusa (CA) Heritage Project

It was community building to collect these stories. Lisa Krissoff Boehm, Worcester (MA) Women's History Project, Oral History Initiative

I'll make a quick comment about community building as an outcome of oral history projects. This comment comes up frequently in discussions and it showed up on a number of the toolkit questionnaire responses. Oral history is pro-active collecting of history. When working with communities of shared interest and knowledge, one outcome can be an increased understanding of the community's history and its role in the broader view of the history of an area. The temptation when including community building as a

project outcome, however, might be just to document one side of a story. We faced this question in the Civilian Conservation Corps oral history project several decades ago. As oral history practitioners, we knew the importance of gathering information from all sides of an issue. We did this, sometimes in ways that many CCC enrollees weren't comfortable with, especially when interviewing African Americans about their experiences – which differed substantially from those of white enrollees. But their voices, along with the voices of everyone we interviewed – enrollees, administrators, and others - helped give us a full picture of the CCC in Minnesota. In part through the oral history project, Minnesota CCC enrollees gained solidarity that they never lost. But they, and we, also now know more about all aspects of Minnesota CCC history because of the broader view we took in the oral history project.

Our goal, then, to reinforce Willa Baum's statement, is to think – not like interviewers – but like oral historians and to apply this knowledge to projects based in the community of shared interests and knowledge. Oral history projects benefit from careful planning, a thorough understanding of the community, clear outcomes, thorough attention to process, leadership from the community of oral history practitioners, and careful documentation of the process. This work results in substantive oral history - information that can help researchers make more sense of the past. And all our communities benefit, just as those third-graders did when they, as part of our community of users and researchers, heard and responded to stories about the big lake and their home area – the stories of commercial fishing along the North Shore of Lake Superior. Thank you.