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Oral history project captures Texas journalists' personal stories

When Wanda Garner Cash was returning last spring from the funeral for TPA past president William Dozier the poignancy of his death struck home — his personal story about his newspaper career would never be heard again. The opportunity to capture his journalistic life, as only he could tell it, had vanished.

“As I was driving back to Austin after his funeral, I remembered some of the great stories ‘Mr. D’ used to tell us about his experiences in the newspaper business, and I lamented that we never recorded them for history,” Cash said.

That loss prompted Cash to action and she asked the Texas Newspaper Foundation for help.



Wanda Garner Cash interviews Lynn Brisendine for the oral history project.

Cash submitted a formal proposal to the Foundation outlining her intent to conduct a comprehensive oral history project interviewing

active and retired Texas newspaper publishers and editors.

The Foundation agreed to underwrite the project that Cash estimates will take about five years to complete and eventually will be housed as printed transcripts and digital audio recordings at the Center for American History at the University of Texas Austin. The oral history project will be a natural complement to the center's Texas newspaper collection.



Brisendine was one of several publishers Cash recorded at the TPA Midwinter Conference Jan. 17-19 in Dallas.

Cash also hopes to eventually post the oral histories on a Web site.

“Time is critical, of course, if we hope to capture the influential newspaper stalwarts,” Cash wrote in the proposal.

So she began in earnest last month interviewing publishers at the Texas Press Association 61st Midwinter Conference & Trade Show in Dallas.

A TPA past president and former newspaperwoman, Cash currently is a clinical professor of journalism and the first Fellow to the S. Griffin Singer Professorship at UT's School of Journalism in Austin. However, she is conducting the oral history project as an independent, individual researcher on her own time.

Some of the oral histories stick to scripted questions but others are free-flowing and more random depending on the storyteller.

"We talk about education and training, what drew them to newspapering, the obstacles and challenges, triumphs and setbacks, inspirations, mentors, leadership style and how they want to be remembered," Cash said. "Sometimes we've talked about the current state of the business and predictions for the future. "All of the interviews are fascinating because of the diversity of experience."

Cash plans to spend the next couple of years traveling around Texas talking to people and conducting more interviews at TPA events.

"The project will help us preserve our history. These interviews will be primary source material for scholars and researchers and just plain folks who are interested in hearing newspaper editors and publishers talk about the impact, intersection and interaction of Texas newspapers on Texas history," she said.