Voices from Vietnam: Building a Collection from a Controversial War¹
By Michael E. Stevens

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In this article, Stevens gives an account of how the Voices of Vietnam Project was initiated, and the steps taken to publish the book and create the Archives as an added bonus. It introduces an unconventional method to build archives of controversial subjects and share the lessons learned from the efforts.

It began in 1992, when State Senator Robert Jauch who is a Vietnam veteran read the book Letters from the Front, and asked if the Wisconsin Historical Society could publish a similar book based on the Vietnam Veterans’ experience. The Society, then,

²Photograph and CV are the courtesy of Michael E. Stevens via e-mail exchanges.
developed a proposal, and Senator Jauch worked to have the legislature pass a bipartisan law to obtain a two-year funding for the project.

Under normal circumstances, the Archival Division would be in charge of archival business. But it was the State Historian’s Office that took the initiative to direct the research and publication efforts, dealt with donors, and maintain communications with the Archive Division to ensure that all activities regarding donations conformed to the Archives’ policies.

The task was not easy. There had never been a base collection of Vietnam vets’ letters or a network of Vietnam veteran donors. Vietnam veterans joined veterans’ organizations at a lower rate than the veterans of WWII did. In addition, the war was fairly recent and therefore these items still hold strong sentimental value. Most veterans did not know about State Historical Society or Archives. Furthermore, the role of the University of Wisconsin, Madison in the Anti War Movement, caused suspicions of the project among veterans because the Society’s headquarters is located on the campus.

Staff members publicized the project actively by attending reunions, distributing brochures, sending out direct mails to related organizations, and getting excellent coverage from every type of media. The most unlikely places that yielded substantial returns were senior centers, where parents of the veterans embraced the project.

From the publicity, the staff was able to reach potential donors, and took the opportunity to explain the book project, accept collections on loan for examination for possible inclusion in the book. (118) The staff also explained about the archives, showed the collections from other war archives, and assured the veterans and their families that their stories would be heard respectfully. Using early contributors to help
in disseminating the project, staff members appealed to more potential donors by interviewing these donors, and developing customized press releases on a particular veteran in each region. (119) Putting a face on the project helped to reassure and convince more veterans to come forward.

Staff learned how important it is to develop good relationships with the veterans. Handing over the letters to the staff was a very emotional moment for the veterans, and the staff reserved several hours for them to unleash the pent-up and painful emotions. (119)

After the publication, each of the more than 230 veterans and their families, who deposited materials, received a book and a letter indicating the Society’s intention to return their material or if they wished they could donate them like their fellow veterans. Knowing that these material still retained a great deal of intrinsic value for many of their owners, the staff offered to make copies, keep the copies return the originals, and vice versa. They duplicated audiotapes, and due to budget constraint copied photographs on a limited scale.

Two hundred and thirty-four veterans and families loaned materials to the book project; 130 depositors or 56% donated collections to the Society. Sixty-three of 92 or 68% donated if they had a letter that appeared in the book, while 67 of 142 or 47% of contributors whose materials did not appear in the book donated. (119) The statistics proved that the book was effective in assuring the veterans of the historical significance of their materials.
The Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans Collection consists of 10.7 cubic feet of manuscripts, 15 reels of manuscripts on microfilm, 40 tape recordings, 3 videotapes, and 1.6 cubic feet of photographs. The 137³ collections vary in size from a single letter to thousands of pages. (120)

The author concludes that there are five lessons to be learned from this project.

1. Subjects of a controversial nature can be better collected by a book project.
2. The willingness to be flexible, and accept copies not only originals, is necessary.
3. Trust is still a vital factor for success.
4. A good relationship with the press is essential.
5. The book is a tangible evidence of how researchers use archival materials, which can convince potential contributors to donate.

I find the article to be informative and affirm what I have read in *A Primer on Manuscript Field Work*. The step-by-step narrative of what needs to be done to create a successful archives makes the task seem approachable to a beginner or student of archives management. It also raises some questions.

Firstly, I have reservation about the urgency to create the archive of such controversial war so soon after the event. Other books in this series were published long after the conflicts were over, and they were not controversial. At the time of the publication, the war was still fresh in everyone’s memory, not to mention the abundance or records and surviving veterans. Wouldn’t the effort be better focused on addressing and easing the pain of these veterans before taking the next step of building the War Archives?
Secondly, it seems that the collection could have received contributions from more than the 234 veterans and families, had the project not started so soon after the war. In addition, the promotion of the project was concentrated in Wisconsin and around the Midwest, which seems too restrictive in today’s lifestyle of moving around the country. The publicity might not have reached enough of the Wisconsin veterans.

Finally, the author mentioned that materials in other form, not only the originals, should be allowed in the collection. If private archives are supposed to collect unique materials, what will be the value of records that are one of the copies-besides those appear in the book? Do users need to come to the archives to use these primary sources, if they are available elsewhere?

³Most recent figure is 174.