

# News & Notes

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# LISTENING IS GOOD FOR PEOPLE



by Anne Flannery, Foy Scalf, and Knut Boehmer

With the centennial celebration of the Oriental Institute upcoming in 2019, we have been thinking long and hard about the history of this place and its people, as well as the fortuitous circumstances that came together in its creation. Seeking a narrative of how the OI came to be, most people have turned to *The Oriental Institute*, the 1933 book by James Henry Breasted authored for the University of Chicago survey. More recently, Jeffrey Abt profiled the Institute in his 2011 biography *American Egyptologist: The Life of James Henry Breasted and His Oriental Institute*. In many ways, these publications have helped to “open up” the hallways of this hallowed place, giving insight into the luminaries upon which all of our work is founded. Abt made extensive use of archival documentation — correspondence, memoranda, contracts, photos — but no one provided an inside look more than Erica Reiner did in her 2002 “tell-all” *An Adventure of Great Dimension: The Launching of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*. Written by a brilliant “insider” on the project, Reiner lifted up the rug for readers on the personalities and squabbles, often with warts and all, involved in completing one of the “great and enduring humanistic” achievements of the twentieth century. It remains one of the most enlightening portrayals inside the ivory tower of academics at work on the esoteric world which is the study of ancient Near Eastern languages.

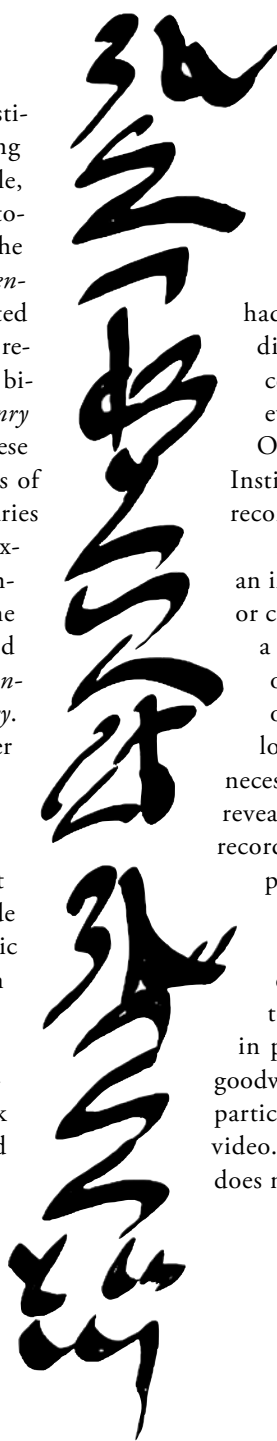
Capturing the history of a place is no easy task, and often time is not on our side. It was former Oriental Institute director Robert McCormick Adams who characterized the CAD as “a great and enduring humanistic achievement,” but it is his following words that so eloquently convey how the historical memory of a time and place is bound up within its people. He went on to describe Reiner’s *Adventure* as an “absorbingly personal memoir on a momentous enterprise by its only

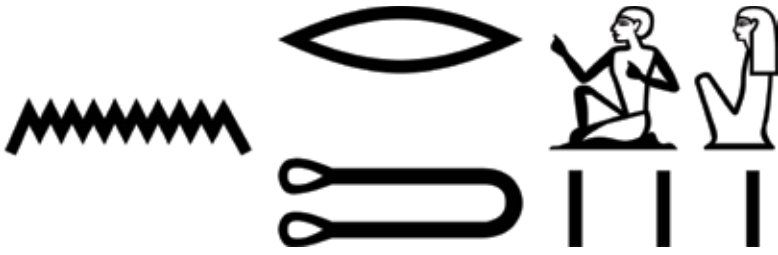
surviving participant.” Adams saw the importance of the oral traditions in our living memories, and it was with particular sadness that we heard of his passing in early 2018. As one of the precious few of the former directors of the OI who was still living, his passing took a large chunk of institutional history with him before we had a chance to interview him. Luckily, the Smithsonian did, and thanks to their generosity, this past fall we received recordings of their 1994 interview with him. Such events encapsulate the mission of the Oriental Institute Oral History Project to capture the living history of the Institute and its community through the aural stories rarely recorded in print.

A complete and comprehensive historical record is only an imaginary ideal. Even when information is written down or captured in a photograph or on film, it still only presents a partial perspective, perhaps focused on the protagonist or observer. Such a record itself is subject to the vagaries of time and the potential biases of collectors; it may be lost or undocumented. Or, it may be disposed of as unnecessary, obsolete, unworthy, offensive, too sensitive, or too revealing. None of these steps are neutral; our records and record keeping reflect a complicated web of social, cultural, political, and personal choices. This leaves us adrift in a landscape of institutional memory without a way to navigate or orient ourselves within the massive amounts of information. It may be counterintuitive, but oral histories can be even more difficult to capture than records in print. The success of the project relies heavily on the goodwill of its participants and the coalescence of technology, particularly in trying to capture both high-quality audio and video. Even with the best of intentions and organization, it does not always work out the way that you want it to.

Top: hieroglyphic transcription of “Listening is good for people” from the Dialogue of a Man and His Soul (column 67 in Papyrus Berlin 3024)

Left: Drawing of the Hieratic text of “Listen to me. Look, listening is good for people” from the Dialogue of a Man and His Soul (column 67 in Papyrus Berlin 3024)





# THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

Capturing the oral traditions of the Oriental Institute is nothing new and has been pursued off and on over the last thirty years. Charles Jones, former bibliographer in the Research Archives for twenty-two years (1983–2005) and research associate, recorded a number of conversations with faculty on audiocassette tapes as a pilot project. Although the quality of the recordings lacked today's inexpensive access to digital recording equipment, there's nothing quite like listening to Thorkild Jacobsen pontificate about Sumerian mythology over beers at Jimmy's Woodlawn Tap, the Hyde Park watering hole frequented by OI denizens for social outings. Another fairly large — but by no means comprehensive — set of materials derives from recording the Members' Lectures held at the Institute on cassette tapes in the 1980s and 1990s. These cassette tapes offer glimpses into the research of former faculty members and were the first step in documenting the voices and stories of the people who created, and continue to create, the institution. It is a pleasure to hear Samuel Noah Kramer express his views on the Sumerian Woman in his own voice, or listen to Erica Reiner discuss the Mesopotamian scientific tradition of herbal encyclopedias. It is a more casual setting than their written work, but with the added texture of voice, pauses, and the audience's reaction. It is this kind of textured experience that gives you not only the history of a place, but the feel of it, which is a key difference between written histories and oral histories. As part of the Oral History Project, these cassette tapes are being digitized and uploaded to the Institute's online platforms, such as YouTube and SoundCloud. Despite the existence of these tapes, there has never been a systematic, let alone comprehensive, recording of the OI's history in the voices that have helped to bear and sustain it. This project seeks to fill that vacuum.

The filling of the vacuum began in 2016 when Foy Scalf (head of Research Archives), Anne Flannery (head of Museum Archives), and Knut Boehmer (IT manager) came together with similar ideas to capture the life of the OI through oral storytelling on modern digital recording equipment. Before the cameras roll,

interviewees are invited to participate, and interview questions are sent to them in advance for review. The project is not seeking salacious gossip, and therefore final approval of content is offered to the participants to ensure their comfort with what is released to the public. We have used the recently renovated Saieh Hall for Economics across the pedestrian way from the OI as our location, but the project seeks to branch out to other locations and formats in the future. On the day of the interview, a two-hour window is booked to cover everything from childhood to the person's experience at the OI and wish list for the OI's future. After the interview is over, extensive editing is done in order to ensure that it is ready for publication on the Oriental Institute's social-media outlets such as YouTube. The first two years of the program have produced interviews from across the community including faculty, staff, and volunteers such as John Larson (former archivist), Robert Biggs (emeritus professor of Assyriology), Carlotta Maher (volunteer, docent, fundraiser, and recipient of the James Henry Breasted medallion), Gil Stein (former director, professor of archaeology), and Janet Johnson (Morton D. Hull Distinguished Service Professor of Egyptology). Capturing the recollections of these key figures from all areas of the institution is the only way to really understand the place and its developments over the last five decades through their shared experience.



Oral history interview with Jill Carlotta Maher, July 11, 2018.  
Photo by Knut Boehmer



Oral history interview with John Larson, former archivist, December 20, 2016

A long-format interview is wonderful for providing time and space to dig deep into a participant's life, career, and experience. Already, we have learned remarkable things, such as how little gender disparity affected Janet Johnson, the first woman to hold a professorship in Egyptology in the United States, and how the dynamic political situations of the Middle East in the twentieth century could dramatically affect the career of a young professional like Robert Biggs, emeritus professor of Assyriology. However, this long format may not be practical for people who want to listen to these stories in a more casual capacity. Recently, the Oral History team has successfully introduced podcasting into the institutional mix by setting up an Oriental Institute account on SoundCloud — a platform that allows oral histories to be downloaded easily through popular apps for offline listening without an internet connection.

As the project further establishes its footing, we look to expand its format and content to include less formal, more digestible segments. Instead of long-format interviews about everything from the subject's early life to research interests and future goals, we will be interviewing people in five- to ten-minute increments about anything from overviews of popular topics, such as cuneiform writing or Egyptian hieroglyphs, to their favorite campus memory. This enables easier and more varied recording, which will only further diversify the cache of stories and voices, giving equal opportunity to faculty, staff, students, volunteers, visitors, post-docs, lecturers, and researchers. In the future, we'd like to combine efforts across the Institute to include an oral-history component at conferences, symposia, lectures, and events in order to cast the widest possible net for compiling the elements of robust oral histories. It is important to keep in mind that there

is not a single view of institutional history, and it is one of the major benefits to an oral-history project that such a history be told from many perspectives.

We largely know the Institute and its past through its works. With the exception of Breasted, most of the personal voices of past generations from the OI community have been lost to time; it is only their academic voices in their publications that remain. Generations today know precious little about what people like A. Leo Oppenheim or Carolyn Ransom Williams were like in their everyday life, or even what they sounded like, as we tend to know them and their voice through their published writings, such as *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* or *Studies in Ancient Furniture*. For the first time, a breadth of previously lost perspectives will bear witness to a part of the Institute that has largely been left in the shadows: its people. As we have so poignantly come to learn through this project, "listening is good for people." This ancient Egyptian literary trope appears in a number of ancient compositions, reflecting the importance of oral storytelling (in addition to obedience) as presented within their own cultural lexicon. In *The Dialogue of a Man with His Soul*, the soul warns the man of focusing too much on the postmortem afterlife, telling him: "Listen to me. Look, listening is good for people. Have a good time and forgo worry." In a similar manner, the god of wisdom Thoth tells Isis in the story of Isis and the Noblewoman: "Come, goddess Isis! Furthermore, listening is good. Someone will live when another guides." We intend to heed the words of wise Egyptian sages and listen intently to the storytellers in our midst, letting them act as guides for us and future generations by preserving their words for all to hear.

## FURTHER LISTENING

This project seeks to make the oral history of the Oriental Institute available online for open access. You can listen to many of the sources discussed in this article at the following links:

- Samuel Noah Kramer, “The Sumerian Woman” October 16, 1975 | <https://youtu.be/Q7pROU9ajcs>
- Erica Reiner, “Hallowed Herbs” December 7, 1988 | <https://youtu.be/IXYLtT-j8Lc>
- John Larson, Interview December 20, 2016 | <https://youtu.be/WA7qjOxmCl4>
- Robert Biggs, Interview March 21, 2017 | <https://youtu.be/NT3CM-CNpVU>
- Janet H. Johnson, Interview May 14, 2018 | <https://youtu.be/EdifGKnQNlg>
- Jill Carlotta Maher, Interview June 11, 2018 | [https://youtu.be/MNIH5\\_u3cvA](https://youtu.be/MNIH5_u3cvA)



Image and Hieroglyphic transcription of “Furthermore, listening is good. Someone will live when another guides” from the story of Isis and the Noblewoman (Metternich Stela, Metropolitan Museum of Art 50.85)





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## INFORMATION

### MEMBERSHIP

#### YOUR PARTNERSHIP MATTERS!

The Oriental Institute depends upon members of all levels to support the learning and enrichment programs that make our Institute an important — and free — international resource.

As a member, you'll find many unique ways to get closer to the ancient Near East — including free admission to the Museum and Research Archives, invitations to special events, discounts on programs and tours, and discounts at the Institute gift shop.

**\$50 ANNUAL / \$40 SENIOR (65+) INDIVIDUAL**  
**\$75 ANNUAL / \$65 SENIOR (65+) FAMILY**

#### HOW TO JOIN OR RENEW

**ONLINE:** [oi.uchicago.edu/getinvolved](http://oi.uchicago.edu/getinvolved)

**BY PHONE:** 773.702.9513

**ONSITE:** at the Gift Shop

### GENERAL ADMISSION

FREE

ADULTS

***\$10 suggested donation***

CHILDREN 12 OR UNDER

***\$5 suggested donation***

### MUSEUM & GIFT SHOP HOURS

*Closed Monday*

*Sun-Tue, Thu-Sat: 10am-5pm*

*Wed: 10am-8pm*

### THE MUSEUM IS CLOSED

January 1

July 4

Thanksgiving Day

December 25

### ACCESSIBILITY

The Museum is fully wheelchair and stroller accessible. The University Avenue west entrance is accessible by ramp and electronic doors.

### PARKING

FREE parking half a block south of the Museum on University Avenue, after 4pm daily and all day on Saturday and Sunday.

### GROUP VISITS

For information about group visits, please go to:

[oi.uchicago.edu/museum/tours](http://oi.uchicago.edu/museum/tours)

