The most public of all history: family history and heritage albums in the transmission of records
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Human thought is consummately social: social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its forms, social in its applications. At base, thinking is a public activity—its natural habitat is the houseyard, the marketplace, and the town square.¹

In the year 1870, prominent New York society members General and Mrs. Egbert Ludovickus Vielé sued each other for divorce on nearly identical grounds: adultery, insanity, and cruelty. General Vielé was accused of having an affair with Miss Julia Dana, and Mrs. Vielé with General W. W. Averill. In 1869 General Vielé had absconded with the children and his mistress. Throughout the ordeal of trying to recover her children and divorcing her unfaithful husband, Mrs. Vielé kept scrapbooks ... letters, newspaper clippings, and telegrams from attorneys and detectives.²

This chapter considers work among family historians and album makers, and especially their guidance in learning the worlds of family history practices. From time spent with them, and time in reflection about them, the two main research questions asked were “What circumstances lead to an interest in family records?” and, “What does work with these records involve?”

Ethnographic Work

To answer these questions, an ethnographic study employing textual analysis, participant observation, and interviewing was conducted. For anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose quote above urges going into “the houseyard, the marketplace, and the town square,” ethnography is defined by “the kind of intellectual effort it is, an elaborate venture in … ‘thick description.’” Such work involves “sorting out structures of signification” and grappling with

a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [the researcher] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.3

Pertinent here is his attentiveness to layers, his weighing of the

multiple forms through which the social is enacted and accounted for … rendered through actions, narratives, texts, visual representations, and material artifacts … [constituting] multiple semantic domains, multiple arenas of action, and multiple sources of significance.4

The recording of the varied evidence, the scrapbook maker Mrs. Vielé also knew. She, in a sense, wrote field notes of her own life.

This study follows these and other examples, and was conceived to allow attentiveness to actor-networks created in the diversity of people, machines, and hierarchies5 moving records across time and space. In general, ethnography allows for concentration on particular cultures via transcripts, analysis, and other reports. As noted in a number of introductory texts in anthropology and sociology, as well as two reports

3 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 6, 9–10.
from archivistics, such multi-method approaches have long been used to give clarity to specific social settings, especially those of a tacit nature. Since many practices concerned with documenting families are isolated almost completely from academic research, and relatively isolated from everyday life outside the home, the library, or archives, ethnography offered the chance to study context and process in “understanding behaviour.” Although most archival science dissertations have relied upon historical research methods rather than ethnography, archivists also have shown that processes are often best studied by observation and direct inquiry of subjects. Helen Samuels makes this point in her functional analysis of college and university documentation, and Elizabeth Yakel also discusses this focus in her dissertation work on recordkeeping in a medical setting.

Ethnographic methods were also chosen since they bring a strong commitment to reflexivity and reflection, the return to the field and documents, the consideration of “what to keep.” Interviewing, textual analysis, and participant observation—a triangulation of methods—allowed a focus on the necessity of gathering materials that gave the most complete picture of processes involved in archivalization, and the work involved with records by those interested in family history. At the same time, Geertz’s “appraisal,” his term for reflection and reflexivity, also reminded me of similarities and

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9 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 16.
differences in archival work and family history work. Thus the triangulation afforded a mindfulness of how these two practices of recordkeeping (family history and archivistics) inform one another.

**Early Stages of Work and Ongoing Considerations**

Early readings and conversations with album makers and genealogical researchers presented many opportunities for being attuned to answers, organizing these insights into patterns, adjusting questions and later, returning to interviewees as the project progressed. Initial work revealed, for example, different strata within particular groups keeping records of the family, but also a number of connections. For both album makers and genealogical researchers, there was usually an elderly holder of the family records—sometimes an album maker—one relative who had records from three to five generations back. There was also usually a much younger person within a smaller family unit who took it upon herself (and usually this was a woman’s role) to begin keeping records on births, diseases, immunizations, schooling, marriages, and deaths. She, too, often made albums but also either spoke with family historians or dreamed of finding the time to document more of her family through records in archives. There was usually one photographer and one “photograph keeper” recognized in a family. Finally, there were the different levels of expertise among genealogical researchers trained in workshops and home-study courses who knew the rules of citation and the necessity of state records, yet who also spoke of an initial reliance upon private records holders. All these people held distinct but overlapping roles and at the same time held opinions of one another, which produced a hierarchy of “knowers,” the levels of expertise mentioned in Chapter Two. In addition, their networks and hierarchies included nonhuman agents of pen, pencil,

photography, scanning, flash drives, and other plentiful storage containers, as well as electronic media of various sorts. Only by considering all these mediating actors from the viewpoint of the informants’ words could the processes of knowledge about family records be understood.

The goal of understanding and then describing recordkeeping work by family historians and album makers also involved exploring their positions in terms of beliefs and attitudes. These, their “attitudinal constructs,” are ways of approaching the world and making decisions about what they do: processes that have been shown by numerous early feminist scholars to differ according to gender.\(^\text{11}\) Political scientist Lyn Kathlene, for example, studied policymaking “under the broad themes of individualism and interdependence that have been found to be or theorized to be gender related….\)” Her “instrumentalism” and “contextualism” were taken as models for constructs that describe the family historians and album makers, such as a division of individuals who were “rules-based” and those who were “connections-based.” Similar to the work of Carol Gilligan on men and women and their varying reasons for decision making on moral issues, the album makers (who were all but one, women) were more “connections-based” in their efforts than were family historians (a female-dominated group that was insistent on codified standards).\(^\text{12}\) But what other factors governed the influences on and opinions of their work? Consideration of attitudinal constructs allowed another way of focusing attention on the possible remnants of past traditions in which women were assigned the

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\(^\text{12}\) Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 99.
role of memorializing the dead\textsuperscript{13} or other traditions in which women were considered more “naturally” inclined to recordkeeping about families, as noted in earlier chapters.\textsuperscript{14}

Other aspects of gender were also considered as being best studied via attentiveness to how people actually worked, to asking if there were any details in current work that suggested a tradition of “gendered-knowing.”\textsuperscript{15} While all ethnographic work requires the active involvement of the researcher in the production of social knowledge through direct participation in and experience of the social realities she is seeking to understand.\textsuperscript{16} Feminist field researchers add the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender as a basic feature of all social life... understanding the social realities of women as actors whom previous sociological research has rendered invisible.\textsuperscript{16}

While much has occurred in the years since Judith Dilorio wrote this statement in 1982, ethnography still remains an approach requiring engagement on a number of levels, something desired here for studying the lives of family historians and album makers, as people who are often left out of academic discourse. Dorothy Smith, writing of her forty-year career in sociology, located her work in feminism and “people’s standpoint” in order to study those excluded from positions of agency. She calls “institutional ethnography” a way of “looking out beyond the everyday to discover how it came to happen as it does.”\textsuperscript{17} This echoes archival educator Eric Ketelaar’s call for looking beyond and questioning the boundaries of records.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{15} Dorothy E. Smith, ed., \textit{Institutional Ethnography as Practice} (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 1.


\textsuperscript{17} Dorothy E. Smith, \textit{Institutional Ethnography as Practice}, 3.

\textsuperscript{18} Ketelaar, “Tacit Narratives,” 132.
Yet the use of the words “beyond the boundaries” must be supplemented by the recognition that what was being learned consisted of how so many family historians and album makers crossed back and forth between recordkeeping and record creating, and how the records continuum played out in their gathering, using, transmitting, and pluralizing records. Since the bridging of public and private in these processes was duplicated in bringing their words to pages in my writing, it was important then in other ways to be conscious of my actions and words as social acts. Though different from my informants, I worked among them and here speak of that work in the first person.\(^\text{19}\) I do so for a number of reasons but most of all because speaking from one’s own perspective is what I asked of family historians and album makers.

Ethnography almost always involves this approach of being willing to stand “poised between familiarity and strangeness … between stranger and friend.”\(^\text{20}\) At the same time, researchers must not “over-identify” with the cultures they study.\(^\text{21}\) I believe I achieved this sort of balance, even though as an archivist, researcher, and resident of the Gulf South, I share with these people the “the same overall cultural framework”\(^\text{22}\) of an interest in records, of the processes of research, and of a place of residence. These were circumstances I told the groups and informants about in beginning the study. I also acknowledged differences: I work with different kinds of records than they do. I write field notes on family historians and album makers. I live here, but I also study this place.

\(^{19}\) For some background on a similar choice, see Karen F. Gracy, “Documenting Communities of Practice: Making the Case for Archival Ethnography,” Archival Science 4, nos. 3-4 (2004): 339 n11.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
In being clear about these methodological concerns, I was received by family historians and album makers with some openness, dependent more on the particular individual and his or her own personal boundaries than on the study itself. That said, genealogists and album makers are a welcoming group, accepting of many different types of people, and accepting of me, in this case, in spite of my difference from them.

**Finding People to Study**

Family historians were located through their associations with selected libraries, archives, and the Genealogical Research Society of New Orleans (GRS, founded 1960), the Jefferson Genealogical Society (Jefferson Parish, being a suburb of New Orleans, the JGS, founded 1984), and the Mobile (Alabama) Genealogical Society (MGS, founded 1960). These are membership-based groups, open to anyone interested in family history, although the New Orleans society restricts themselves to “natural born persons,” meaning someone born in the United States or to U.S. citizens living in other countries. All three have members who range in years of practice from one to more than forty years. Also interviewed were six genealogical researchers who were not members of these societies but who were active in lineage groups, library workshops for family history, and other genealogical groups. An attempt was made to include a spectrum of practitioners at various levels, including one board-certified genealogist, and representatives of different ethnic and racial groups.

Album makers were located either from referrals among family historians or from meetings with scrapbook consultants. Most of these consultants and their clients worked with the well-known Creative Memories products. However, through visiting scrapbook
stores and attending their workshops, as well as through word of mouth, six album makers who worked with products sold by other companies were also interviewed.

**Phases of the Study**

In addition to reading about family history, records, memory and archives, this study involved five phases of ethnographic work, data analysis, and writing. Time was allowed also for periods of overlap to adjust the theoretical concepts and the steps within each phase—the process of appraisal discussed above. This flexible research approach “embraces the continuous learning process, devalues the dichotomous subject/object distinction, and allows for a more open research approach.”23 One example of this approach was Anne-Marie Fortier’s study of Italian women as central to the memories of a migrant community in England.24 Another was Beverly Skeggs’s study of the formation of class and gender, which likewise proceeded with simultaneous interviewing, observation, and reading, with each phase of research enlightening the others until the conclusions.25

**Phase One**

In this phase, groups, individuals, and settings were identified. This period also involved gathering and studying textual information about the groups (their own publications and those of others), participating in meetings, and observing activities and actors. A questionnaire was designed and the first ten interviews were conducted.

*Textual analysis

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Textual analysis involved studying printed and online matter from the groups (their handouts, histories, by-laws, descriptions, and websites). Attention was paid to the style of writing, as well as content, modes of expression, and particular vocabularies. Taking a cue from cultural studies methodology, similar publications from other groups were also studied. These documents were important for two reasons. First, understanding them brought opportunities for comparisons. Second, understanding them added to the analysis of texts available to album makers and family historians.

**Participant Observation**

During 2006, 2007, and 2008, I was allowed to participate and observe the work of family history. As its name explicitly states, participant observation requires entry into a setting where people work, familiarization with people and places, development of relations with people, observation of many different events and functions, and involvement in daily routines. All of these were possible for me except a consistent involvement in daily routines. However, the lack of daily time with informants mirrored also their work: only one of the respondents themselves worked every day, or even five days a week on their projects.

I devoted some 200 hours to interviewing, textual analysis, and participation in various activities with family historians and album makers. These hours were spent in attending business meetings and workshops, researching alongside them in local libraries and archives (including one library maintained by the Mobile Genealogical Society where more than anywhere else conversation was constant and genealogy was the only topic of conversation in a dedicated space), learning from lineage societies’ one-on-one

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sessions, and taking a workshop on genealogical research. For work with album makers, this meant attending open houses, “cropping” sessions where one makes albums seated beside others who are doing so, and workshops on technology offered by different companies for scrapbook makers. These occurred in private homes where the consultants are based, or in large halls in churches, schools, or camps, rented especially for those times when long tables are needed, and where participants can remain for six hours straight, or even longer, as in the all-weekend or vacation sessions.

In early meetings, information was distributed about the study. In this way, the names of future interviewees were gathered as I discussed my role and my work as a researcher. This honesty was important personally, but also was a part of my conformity to the rules of the Internal Review Board (IRB) of the Office of Research of Tulane University. Introductory materials were also developed that provided consent forms that met IRB standards. The questionnaires were also approved by IRB.

Field notes were written after each meeting, providing information on the settings, descriptions of those persons in attendance, stories and queries presented. Some of these field notes were entered into word processing files so that they might be easily used in the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, discussed more below. The field notes served more immediately in facilitating weekly or daily analysis of learning, and planning the next steps.

**Phase Two**

Based on textual analysis and participant observation experiences, Phase Two included more participant observation and a redesign of the questionnaire. The latter was

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28 The consent form allowed for the taping, transcription, and use of the words of the interviewees in published and unpublished reports, and for the deposit of the interviews in the Newcomb Archives.
necessary because the first draft of the questionnaire was too long. The pretest informants, who had been asked for three stories of looking for ancestors, proved very voluble about stories of lost ancestors or opinions on such issues as family cohesiveness. The revised questionnaire asked only about one project.

Added in this period were questions about education and gender, topics that earlier had been expected to come forward without having to be asked. Similarly, the most surprising finding about questions-to-be-asked concerned how much informants wished to follow a specific guideline. The questionnaire first had been based upon the writing of scholars in cultural studies, grounded theory, and feminist studies. These scholars believe that ethnographers gain the best information by seeing interviewing as an art of conversation. The interview instrument, the guide, should be then just that: only a list to which one refers.29

My previous ethnographic work (done in the 1980s and 1990s) had born out the call for flexibility and this free-form interviewing.30 From this earlier study, I learned more particularly about issues of race and gender in interviews where I overlooked the questionnaire and encouraged interviewees to talk about their own concerns. In the interviews in this current study, however, neither family historians nor album makers seemed comfortable with this free-form approach. Genealogical researchers especially seemed to like questions being followed from a sheet of paper, and were curious about “what was written down” to ask. Perhaps because they have long felt academic

discrimination and because they come from a rules-based form of inquiry, they wanted to see the questions, and they wanted to give answers to specific questions. Album makers were less intent upon seeing the questionnaire, but they too seemed to wait for the next question, to follow more than to lead in our “conversations.” Creating a well-designed questionnaire, not just one to serve as an ice-breaker, then, became one of the most important activities in the second phase of research.

Major areas covered in the questionnaire concern demographic information, employment and educational background; general questions about beginning and continuing motivations and knowledge of records; processes and practices; purposes and vocabularies. A copy of the questionnaire appears in the appendix.

Phase Three

In the third phase, the revised questionnaire enabled a return to the original ten interviewees and completion of a total of fifty-two interviews (twenty-six family historians and twenty-six album makers). This phase also included again attending meetings and workshops, completing a family heritage album and beginning research in my own family history, as well as other work alongside informants in various other endeavors.

As noted above, respondents were selected based upon the range of backgrounds they seemed to represent. Those interviewed included one professional genealogist alongside a handful of expert researchers without credentials, beginning researchers, consultants with experience making albums for others, consultants who had themselves

31 A number of the interviewees discussed this discrimination. See also Robert M. Taylor and Crandall, “Historians and Genealogists,” 15–16; Mills, “Genealogy in the ‘Information Age,’” 260–271.
32 Gracy, “The Imperative to Preserve,” 113.
33 A copy of the questionnaire appears in the appendix.
made over 50 scrapbooks, or others who had made just one or a few albums. These individuals were selected in order to have as many different people from different stages of life, different races, educational backgrounds, employment categories, and different social and economic classes. On the whole, however, they mirrored national demographic backgrounds of their respective groups.

*Family Historians*

Among the family historians, twenty-four lived in areas along the Gulf Coast, south Louisiana, the cities of New Orleans and Mobile, or were visiting or working (hurricane relief work) in this area during 2006–2008. The other two came from the Washington, D.C. area, though one of these was also originally from the Gulf Coast area. Of the twenty-six family historians interviewed, eleven were male and fifteen were female.

In ages, they ranged from 16 to 83 years, with the breakdown as follows:

![Family Historians by Age and Gender](chart)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Number of Family Historians (26 Total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-89</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All but three were white Caucasians of European descent. Three were African American, and these three were male.

Of the twenty-six, six worked or had worked in a professional field; three were or had been blue collar workers; one worked as a housewife; six worked in traditionally female administrative and clerical positions; and ten worked in the education sector. In this latter sector, there was one professional genealogist.

Although interviewees were not asked about income, all but one family historian spoke of jobs that placed them within the middle class. However, three spoke of childhoods with some deprivation (the necessity of placing children up for adoption, the necessity of children going to work at age fourteen, and the necessity of joining the military in order to get medical coverage).

The interviewees showed a wide variety of educational levels:

![Education Level by Gender](chart)
In age and educational level, these demographics mirror the demographic make-up of family historians nationwide. A wide variety of people are interested in genealogy. In the sample of interviewees and in the membership records studied, people over 65 made up approximately one-tenth of the members of the groups. Similarly, though there is an assumption that retired people form a large majority of family historians, the National Genealogical Society (NGS) reported the numbers of “senior members” at 1,655, or some 23 percent, out of 7,815 individual members in April, 2008.34

In terms of gender, women make up a slightly higher percentage (seventy-seven percent, sixty-two percent, seventy-one percent, respectively) of current members from the Mobile Genealogical Society, the Genealogical Research Society of New Orleans, and the Jefferson Genealogical Society.

*Album Makers*

Among the album makers, twenty-four of the interviewees lived in areas along the Gulf Coast, in the city of New Orleans, or were visiting and working (hurricane relief work) in this area during 2006–2008. Two were from the Washington, D.C. area. Of the twenty-six album makers interviewed only one was a man, and he was of European descent. Two album makers were African American, one was Hispanic—the rest were of other European ancestry. One fell into the age bracket of 15 to 30 years old. Fourteen fell between the ages of 31 and 45; seven, ages 46 to 65; two, ages 66 to 75; and two, ages 75 to 90. Overall, five were retired; eleven were employed outside the home. Seven worked at home (two with their own businesses, and five as Creative Memories consultants). Two album makers represented other scrapbooking companies—one represented her own

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34 Jan Alpert, President of the National Genealogical Society (NGS), email to author, April 16, 2008. Alpert also stated that no statistics existed that counted male versus female members.
company, and another represented more than one company and also worked as a professional. Three were full-time stay-at-home mothers who did not have an outside job.

![Bar chart showing Heritage Album Makers' Employment](chart.png)

In terms of education, twelve stopped schooling after high school; two held vocational degrees; twelve held degrees from colleges or universities, with four of these holding graduate degrees (two in business, one in educational administration, and one in veterinary science).
Although information about income was not gathered, all the interviewees lived in (or spoke of living in) neighborhoods that could be described as middle class. Fifteen were interviewed in their homes and these homes were in affluent suburbs—with two- or three-car garages, and wide expanses of lawns. Two others lived in rural areas and had homes one would also describe as middle class. Only two interviewees lived in urban settings, both in New Orleans, and one of these (the one man noted above) was from a family known for its wealth and philanthropy. Both he and the Hispanic woman were members of the upper middle class. Even the architecture of their homes held stories these album makers recounted with pride.

Twenty-one album makers spoke of strong roots to the neighborhoods where they lived. At times, this allegiance came from their own families of origin; for others, this came through their spouse’s family. Eleven lived in the same metropolitan area of their childhood and their parents’ childhoods; ten lived in the same region of their childhood,
the South. Three have moved from one region to another, mostly from the Midwest or the Eastern Seaboard. And two have lived within other countries. All felt a particular allegiance to the Gulf Coast, a sensibility that was not unusual among those who had been through the 2004 and 2005 storm seasons. It was striking that they discussed this allegiance more often than did family historians.

**Analysis**

As in Phases One and Two, textual analysis, continuing participant observation, and interviewing in Phase Three provided the chance to gather information, analyze and test findings. Phase Three also presented opportunities for exploring the two main research questions, how people come to this interest in records and what their work with records involves. All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder, as were many conversations at other gatherings. Interviews lasted from one to three hours. Five interviewees called or wrote emails afterwards to tell of various aspects on which they wanted to elaborate.

Listening to the interviews occurred first within twenty-four hours of completion. Questions to be asked in a return visit or by phone calls and email were then formulated and pursued. As noted earlier, this sort of constant interaction allowed learning from the interviews, and was part of a number of different theoretical approaches to research. Grounded theory, for example, offers the conceptualization of “generations of theories.”

Similarly, the reflexive orientation of feminist and institutional ethnographies emphasizes the competencies of interviewees and their ability to enlighten the research design.

The interviews were transcribed promptly. Transcriptions were entered into NVivo, a qualitative data management and analysis software program. This program

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35 Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 47.
allows the analysis of responses and patterns of words used, as well as the production of various statistical reports.

**Phase Four**

As the transcripts and field notes were reread, Phase Four saw the beginning of closer analysis. Defined as the identification of passages that exemplify ideas and concepts,\(^{37}\) coding has been more elegantly depicted as those “analytical processes through which data are fractured, conceptualized, and integrated to form theory.”\(^{38}\) Coding with the help of the software program NVivo allowed the insight into both this process and the vocabularies and processes of family historians and album makers. Open coding was chosen as a method, for as Strauss and Corbin suggest, this process avoids labels that are merely associative and allows the formulation of theoretical names based upon what one is learning.\(^{39}\)

The success of coding “lies in turning the answers” of the interviewee into “specific pieces of field-note data.” The researcher must create “a distinctive kind of writing—a word or short phrase that captures and signals what is going on in a piece of data in a way that links it to some more general analytical issue.”\(^{40}\)

With the NVivo reports in hand, six of the interviewees were contacted again for further discussions. These interviewees were chosen because of their articulate and insightful comments, as well as the lengthy descriptions of records travelling over time and space. Two of these series of interviews are discussed in depth in Chapter Seven.

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40 Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 146.
During this time, selected archivists and librarians who work with family historians were also consulted. In these discussions, questions about various patterns were asked in order to have their opinions on the representativeness of the findings. Although a number of researchers question the need for such consultations and other measures in qualitative research,\(^4\) they proved useful in this work. First, as Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, and Sara Delamont urge, some sort of verification of findings provides insight into epistemological issues,\(^4\) certainly a concern of this study involving how informants think of their own knowledge. Second, as Ann Gray observes, these sorts of evaluations allow insight into ontological issues,\(^4\) here aiding in formulations of ideas about groups, memories, and hierarchies.

In addition, in this Phase Four, Karen Gracy’s dissertation in archivistics was a reference point. Gracy took as her measure for bias the words of Robert Weiss, listing four areas to monitor in qualitative research: sampling, interviewing, interpretation and reporting, and intellectual honesty.

In considering sampling, the hypersensitivity of those of us from the Gulf Coast area was recognized, and is discussed more below. By and large, though, care was given not to choose interviewees who seemed so upset by the flooding that they could not offer thoughts on broader topics. In other areas of the sample, an attempt was made, as noted, to include many different types of family historians and album makers, with different levels of expertise and skills.

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\(^4\) Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, *Key Themes in Qualitative Research*, 148.

In terms of interviewing, almost all questions were open-ended. Each respondent was asked to answer as honestly as he or she could without regard for what they might think was desired. Only once did an interview take place in a crowded room, where possibly others could overhear, and this time, at the behest of the informant. Each interview began with a statement to the informants about how their own experiences and thoughts best informed the study.

In terms of interpretation and reporting, the project was conceived such that the analysis of texts, transcripts, and field notes allowed concentration not only on what was stated but also on the patterns of thoughts and the choice of words. The use of software helped in this matter, as did a comparison of different ways of using family records, of different products and goals, and of the organization and display of work.

Finally, an ongoing focus on intellectual honesty meant the necessity of weekly writing, evaluating this writing, and assessing interpretations of descriptions and explanations. The latter involved asking others to read this work.

**Phase Five**

In the fifth phase, all transcripts, field notes, categories, and patterns were studied again and findings were written. The chapters that follow show this analysis. One decision during writing was the choice to use pseudonyms, rather than actual names or some sort of numbering system for interviewees (Family Historian 1, Album Maker 2, etc.). The use of numbers seemed rather stilted especially given that names are so important to family history. Pseudonyms then were chosen to conform to the guidelines of the IRB at Tulane University. However, because of the public nature of the accounts told in Chapter Seven, actual names are used there.
In addition, because some information was obtained at crops and at meetings, there were in fact more informants than the 52 interviewees. While the majority of the words of family historians and album makers cited in this study come from the interviews, from time to time, these others informants (outside the 52 interviews) are quoted and are not identified by any name.

**Setting and Methodological Considerations**

As previously mentioned, the choice of the Gulf Coast setting brought a heightened sensitivity to records, their importance, and their vulnerabilities. Recall from Chapter One that in the first example of a family historian, Joseph is dependent on those records scanned or otherwise represented in software programs since “his originals” perished in the flooding of 2005. Recall too that he now works more with Anna, the first album maker presented and his cousin, since he had given her copies. Like these two, all the other interviewees mentioned the flooding and hurricanes as central to their willingness to talk to me, and as central to their thoughts on so much about what they do, and about what the loss of records means on so many different personal and societal levels.

This setting was chosen since I too live in this area. The work itself enabled an exploration of a subject important to me and to the archival profession, that is, a description of how people maintaining personal archives are influenced by disasters, and how they consider records amidst disasters and disaster recovery.

Yet this setting also presented some methodological problems that can only be addressed through various statements to readers. First, there will always be questions about my own sensitivity and being careful not to push in certain areas that held so much
emotion for all of us in this area. Second, there is the recognition that the people on the Gulf Coast have certainly given more thought to the fragility of records than have people in other places.

For these reasons, four interviews were conducted in the Washington, D.C. area. Yet even these interviewees were very conscious of the storm and the possible dangers to records. Hurricane Katrina’s coverage by the press was extensive. To recount even a small part of what interviewees knew first- or secondhand of the storm’s damage is not the intent of this study but there is some hope that someone else later will use the interviews for that purpose.

Eight of the twenty-six family historians (or half of the total of fifteen who lived in the New Orleans metropolitan area) had extensive hurricane damage with three people having more than twenty feet of water in their homes for over three weeks. Three had more than six feet of water, though it did not stay in the houses for more than a day. Of the eight who had flooding, all had some computer backups and/or materials located higher than the twenty feet, and thus saved many records. But two family historians lost all their paper copies.

Among album makers, six had so much damage to their homes that they were away for more than six months. Three more had damage to their places of work. Eight more were away for five months during the fall of 2005. All of them were able to save their albums and their research materials, however.

For these people and other people knowledgeable about the fragility of records, the storms brought many reasons for concern. Twenty-three repositories had damages
totaling more than one million dollars in costs for restoration. Four interviewees discussed these institutional losses. Most damages occurred because remediation work could not begin for weeks after the storm. In neighboring Mississippi, four courthouses and records in 22 depositories suffered extensive damage, and one interviewee in Mobile discussed this. Each interviewee, however, in New Orleans and Mobile, discussed precautions and other means of safeguarding records at home, that is, private records. What one interviewee stated was probably true for all of us during 2006 and 2007: The damages from the 2005 storms were “on my mind every day.”

Family historians and album makers both practically and philosophically continued their work with records almost immediately after the storm. As Emily (b. 1925) noted, “Would we not do it just because it could be lost? I think we do it because it can be lost, because we know so much is lost of life. Life is short.” And as another said, “In doing this you are saying, something lasts. That’s what all family history says too. What drives it is that we want something to last.”

Cognizance of Ethnographic Interfaces

The compulsion to find memory, sociologist Iwona Irwin-Zarecka might answer, is what these interviewees are describing. For Irwin-Zarecka, inscribing is a process that is attuned not only “to the vicissitudes of historical knowledge or narrative” but also to “the construction of our emotional and moral engagement with the past.” Family historians and album makers are part of a dynamic process shaping this emotional and moral engagement. The following chapters explore and present their interfaces, my

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45 Julia Marks Young, Director of State Archives, Mississippi, conversation with the author, July 16, 2006.
46 Irwin-Zarecka, Frames of Remembrance, 6.
lessons gained by joining them, extending, as Geertz recommended “the consultable record,” something Mrs. Vielé also understood in her scrapbook making.

47 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 30.