

Hello everyone and thanks for inviting me to come and share some of my project with you day. In April 2015 I began research for my Ph.D., interested in the history behind the resurgence in curiosity in moving onto the land and 'going off-grid'. I wanted to know why people were motivated to make this move, where did these ideas come from, did it have anything to do with nature or 'environmentalism', and how far back did this urge go? A dearth in oral history concentrating on environmental themes has been noted by colleagues, and in the literature. In particular, I have struggled to find oral history testimony that explores broader environmental values over specific relationships to place or landscape. As written documentary sources of people's move off-grid are scattered and scarce, and I was interested in a national story, it became clear that if I was to understand why people had historically made this move, I could only do so if I could find them and talk to them. Termed 'communing with nature' in American historiography, I hoped my research, including a broad ranging but focussed oral history project, could bring to light an example of 'living at home with nature' as a recurring form of environmentalism in Australian history.

Many here may be familiar with the term 'off-grid'. Broadly speaking, contemporary interpretations represent an expression for living in environments disengaged from the services, institutions and lifestyles of mainstream society. The expression emerged in the past two decades referring to the decision for individuals, families and communities to live outside the electricity infrastructure (or 'grid') servicing the area. Some might see it as limited to using independent technological systems such as solar/wind power and batteries. However, in many cases, the decision to move off-grid is in conjunction with a variety of activities that represent a more diffuse and complex engagement with society, the elements and the natural

world.¹ With little historical research undertaken on this trend, particularly the prevalence of 'independent' alternative living dwellers over 'communal', I started looking for iterations of this desire. What is, in fact, an increasingly global inclination, popular in England, Europe, and even Russia, - the most predominant point of reference and historical tradition is the American homesteading movement.

Homesteading is a popular term describing the movement of people out of the cities onto rural properties - it is a descendent of the little house on the prairie frontier tradition. They tend to grow their own food, build their own homes, live close to nature and make the home the centre of personal, professional and spiritual existence. A resurgence of interest has been generating since the financial crisis of 2008, cumulating in a larger subset of 'urban homesteading', though not the focus of my research. Multiple online networks are growing rapidly, according to one website, to "share tools to live more sustainably, including but not limited to: growing more food on less land through permaculture design, using low-cost electronics to automate your garden and build 'shared ownership' systems to pool resources.'

Mostly leaning towards being off-grid, modern homesteaders are an increasingly politically, economically and technologically sophisticated movement. 'Digital homesteading' emerged more recently and has come to represent using technology to live "bright green lives", by leveraging digital technology to create a rural revival. Off-grid homesteaders are active through conferences, magazines, newsletters, online discussion lists and websites dedicated to the cause. In line with an idiom I came across that back-to-the-landers generally produce more words than vegetables, they now have a strong on-line network, presence and vast body of online and published material to sift through. Hence with all of this readily available

¹ P Vannini, *Off the Grid: Re-Assembling Domestic Life*, Florence, Taylor and Francis, 2014.

information and resources, what can an oral history project contribute that can't be found on survival.org or the Australian homesteading page on facebook with its 12,000 followers?

I have been directed to discuss how the digital revolution might be transforming the creation, curation, interpretation or dissemination of oral history. Today I will share the creation and dissemination of my research material and the way engagements with digital technology have generated opportunities and provided potential outputs for my research. As a researcher from the very edges of GenX, I may have taken a lot for granted in terms of recognising the unconscious construction of an oral history project, spread over every state that relied heavily on digital networks and technologies. I will begin talking about how using elements of the digital world enabled my engagement with off-grid people, how I can use digital platforms to enable a wider audience, and argue for oral history stories as distinct from online repositories and social networking sites.

As the title of my presentation suggests, 'digital homesteading', the now almost seamless combination of old and new technologies, is ubiquitous amongst even the most 'off-grid' of my participants. I undertook my first oral history project over 10 years ago as part of my honours thesis. I was interested in conservation and the wilderness concept, and interviewed a range of farmers and local residents adjacent to a famous national park. As most of you would be fully aware, participants were commonly found by word of mouth. How old-school! As I have been working as an environmental educator for many years, I was fully aware when I constructed my new project, with a much grander scope and vision, where and how I would find a good assortment of off-gridders, from each decade, with a range of longevity and social backgrounds. The internet. Already linked into dozens of on-line groups dedicated to alternative living and off-grid themes, I was aware of its popularity and prevalence across the

states and territories, including its strong transnational flavour as a means of sharing a common ideology against mainstream systems and thinking. A

longside a few well-timed radio national spots pitched at particular regions in NSW with a high prevalence for the 'alternative type', the call for participants was made through facebook which encouraged people to make contact and register their interest. Using visual imagery of 'back to the land' type activities, my posts were targeted and deliberate to catch the attention of those already living off-grid to share their story. As such, my itinerary, to leave Melbourne at the start of winter and make my way north both dictated and responded to the expressions of interest I gathered. Keeping in mind an equal age, gender, state and period distribution, without an over-representation of a particular (baby boomer) generation, a fairly daunting schedule took me east, up the coast all the way into southern Queensland, undertaking close to 25 interviews in 5 weeks. As the only connecting thread was that each person had to 'live off grid', the testimonies were diverse, with crossovers and themes slowly emerging. The other significant link was that the connection came through the internet, mostly through Facebook. Along with a few 'word of mouth' references, it was hardly surprising that off-grid people were active in the online world, if not more so, than most of us in the cities. The almost fanatical online discussions I see through the facebook networking sites indicate a strong movement seeking further points of connection to support what can, for many, be a difficult and challenging life choice. Like many oral history projects, the subjects were relieved and enthusiastic to talk, being off grid in some cases means few visitors. In other cases, seeking isolation and independence in rural areas with less than sympathetic neighbours makes for a very difficult life choice indeed.

Though I came to the project with established networks and contacts, without the efficient use of the ubiquitous social media machine, I wouldn't have been able to cast such a wide net. What may have, even 10 years ago, been a much more daunting project to undertake, finding willing off-grid living participants was feasible and relatively easy to identify, locate, and visit in 2016. While it might seem straight forward, as a postgraduate student with little time and money, the central role of digital networking enabled a far richer, more diverse and geographically representative sample. It allows for a much wider analysis of the material, alongside the potential to represent a 'national' story, as diverse as it has become common. According to a radio national program last year devoted to living off grid, this marginal group of people now represent close to 2% of the Australian population.

In terms of dissemination, through working in the Northern Territory archive I have managed to get the two interviewees there to discuss donation of their stories to the extensive Northern Territory Archives Service oral history index. Though topics discussed were more of a whole of life style interview with a focus on their decision to move out of the cities and onto the land, there was little interest by participants to open the interviews to an online repository. As some of the subjects were sensitive on some issues, from illegal building to Christian separatism, not all interviewed were keen on having their details released. Thus aside from the excerpts I will use in my thesis or in conference papers, a podcast or radio program was often suggested by my subjects. As many of us now consume a good portion of our entertainment and information in podcast or radio form, this material lends itself to a social history radio documentary format whilst maintaining anonymity. Being able to use the audio material in a creative manner, as distinct from an on-line repository, would enable wider narratives to be drawn out of a project and attract a different (read younger) audience.

As I was also contacted, through the process of undertaking my field research, by an independent filmmaker who is now searching for funding to realise some of my case studies onto a visual platform. The interviews would be reframed and redone, but the case studies for the film would be based on participants I visited during the oral history project. If funding is possible, the stories of 8 off-gridders around Australia will hopefully reach a wider audience through film release or short episodes for ABC online. Providing a different means of interpreting the material collected during my research, opening up the stories to other possibilities and platforms for effective communication means recognising the potential audiences currently engaged with this topic. From what I gathered along my research trip, the potential interest in this area is significant and taps into a very prescient interest and passion.

In regards to the specific contribution that oral history has to offer in this case, I reflect on both the meaning embodied in crafting a story from memory, and the role of oral history to bring out the stories of the margins. What I tried to explore in my interviews was what drew these people towards an off-grid lifestyle, beyond the tired expression of 'getting out of the rat race'. As I repeatedly asked the participants to talk of their influences and ideological traditions, it became clear that the Australian 'scene' has no clear 'gurus' or icons which link people across the states or generations. Many saw their move as a response to conditions or politics in the cities, rather than an articulated creation of an imagined 'other' or in a particular philosophical tradition. Without having a stranger come the 15km up their wrecked slippery ex-logging road driveway to ask these questions, most of the participants hadn't seen their actions as part of a wider movement or a longer narrative, and enjoyed the stories I shared as a form of songline along my travels. They became more aware of the meanings embodied

by their actions according to particular traditions, the significance of the life decision they made and the potential for their story to be a lesson or inspiration for others.

As the classical ambition of oral history is to collect stories from the margins, off-grid people symbolically and physically embody this vision. Oftentimes those who have turned their backs on urban life have stopped looking for support or connections to the values and visions of 'the mainstream'. To go out in search of these stories, to record them and hopefully disseminate in a popular media form, re-connects the threads of disconnection that moving off-grid may have symbolised. Engaging with what Alistair Thomson noted in his chapter on memory and remembering, this kind of oral history can help people make sense of their past, to connect individual experience and its social (and environmental) context, and help explore together how the past becomes part of the present.² For the participants, it provided a rare opportunity to reflect on experiences and decisions hardly perceived as significant, now re-considered in light of increased awareness of one's individual footprint on problems related living more lightly on the earth. Through the process of linking these stories, a synthesis of experiences across the generations and across the states could be created and a consistent narrative uncovered. As I have discovered, there is a link from Thoreau to modern day eco-villages of people yearning to dis-engage from mainstream systems and re-engage with simple living practices. The engagement embodies both a dialogue with nature and a "rustic life as a tonic for the ills of industrial capitalism."³ As it turns out, being off the grid in the 21st century, is rustic whilst also just a few clicks away.

² Alistair Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, 2011, 80.

³ MA Hewitt & G Stickley, *Gustave Stickley's Craftsman Farms: The Quest for an Arts and Crafts Utopia*, Syracuse University Press, 2001, 4.