Interviewing Family Members: Oral History Basics

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What is Oral History?
• A dialogue with the past
• Recording and transcription of a first hand account (interview) of a historical event or person.

Why are Oral History projects important?

Primary Sources
• Learn historical information from a first-person account
• Gain unique and original perspectives

Historic Preservation
• Create and preserve history and traditions

Share Family History
• Oral history projects like family history interviews and biographical life histories help share your ancestors’ lives with future generations.

The Oral History Process

Pre-Interview

First Steps:
- Scope/Scale
- Themes: Topics, Subjects, People, Places, etc.
-Who, what, when, why, how?

Who do you want to interview?
- Friends, family, acquaintances?

Background Research
- Review other primary and secondary sources about your chosen topic to help with generating interview questions.

Equipment Considerations
- Recording Device
  - Look for digital recorders
  - USB adaptors are nice to have for easy transfer of files to your computer.
- Microphones
  - Look for condenser microphone types rather than dynamic microphones
- Lighting/Sound/Background
  - For Video interviews

Recording on a smartphone
- Voice recorder apps
  - iPhone: Voice Memo; Rev Voice Recorder
  - Android: Smart Recorder, Rev Voice Recorder
- Audio Editing Tools
  - Audacity
  - WavePad Audio Editor

Legal Considerations
- Forms:
- Basic release form template:
  https://sites.duke.edu/archivox/2015/01/29/oral-history-basic-release-template/
- Copyright Considerations
-Will you publish the interview, post it online, or include it in an article?

-Suggested Reading

-A Guide to Oral History and the Law
By John A. Neuenschwander
Call no. 344.73 N481G

Ethical Considerations

- Try not to surprise your narrator(s) with unexpected topics or questions.
- Help the narrator(s) feel like a partner in your project by asking them to take part in deciding the main topics and/or questions.
- Do not mislead you narrators or use leading questions to get a certain answer.
- Respect the narrator’s privacy and comfort
- Make sure to discuss if there are any topics that the narrator or interviewee does not want to talk about.
- Offer the narrator a chance to review the completed interview.

Interview Practice Tips

- Watch other interviews
- Practice interviewing with friends, family, or colleagues
- Test equipment before the interview
- Choose equipment and technology that you feel comfortable operating

Challenges

- Interruptions such as phones, loud noises, distractions or loud interview environments.
- Avoid recording problems by bringing back up batters and/or chargers
- Test equipment
- Smartphones and tablets can be good options and work well as backups

Pre-Interview Meetings

- Describe the project and purpose for the interview
- Allow time for the narrator/interviewee to provide feedback on preferred topics and any privacy concerns or restrictions.
- Acquire informed consent from the narrator/interviewee
- Have documents prepared for narrator to sign
- Go over the procedures
- Set a pre-determined length for the interview(s)
- Decide on a location
- Decide on the number of participants
- Ask the narrators about their expectations
- Keep a record of the meeting(s)

**Reluctant narrators/interviewees**
- Collaborate: encourage the narrators to be a partner in the project
- Ensure that participants are aware that they have the right to protect their private and personal information.
- Optional: send questions ahead of time; send survey with topics and questions they would most like to discuss

**Interview Extras**
- Family heirlooms/artifacts
- Family photographs
- School yearbooks
- Awards/achievements

**Interview Formats**
- Audio: usually less equipment is required and can be used in many different locations
- Video: helpful when including photos, artifacts, or memorabilia; some people may not feel comfortable with video

**Best Practices**
- Oral History Association
  https://www.oralhistory.org/best-practices/

**The Interview Process**

**Lead Statements**
- Start each interview with a lead statement
- Include:
- The names of narrator and interviewer
- Date and time of session
- Interview location
- Subject/topic of the interview

**Interview Styles**
- Q&A
- Conversational
- Fluid & Flexible

**Practice Good Listening Skills**
- Active listening
- Take notes
- The narrator is the expert

**Interview Tips**
- Be encouraging
- Create a list of keywords and phrases
- Do not overwhelm your narrator
- Say thank you
- Pauses are okay
- Allow time for people to collect their thoughts
- Avoid filing in answers when pauses occur

**Post Interview**

**Transcribing**
- Google Docs Voice Typing
- Express Scribe Transcription

**Indexing**
- Time coding
- Time-subject index
- Index as soon as possible
- Find obvious breaks in the topic or breaks in time
- The more details, the better
- Use hour, minute, and second format
- Digital playback and transcribing software is very helpful

**Future Use**
- Publish
- Share
- Donate

**Resources**

**Books**
- Oral History for the Family Historian
  By Linda Barnickel
  Call no. 907.2 B262O

- The Oral History Workshop: Collect and Celebrate the Life Stories of Your Family and Friends
  By Cynthia Hart and Lisa Samson
  Call no. 907.2 H325O

- Doing Oral History
  By Donald A. Ritchie
  Call no. 907.2 R598D

**Online Resources**

- How to Guides:
  Baylor University’s Institute for Oral History: “Introduction to Oral History Manual”
-Equipment Reviews & Suggestions
   Digital Audio Field Recording Equipment Guide-Vermont Folklife Center
   https://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/fieldwork-guides
-Blogs, articles, websites
   -Family Tree Magazine
   https://www.familytreemagazine.com/interview-tips-questions-family-history/

Organizations
   -Oral History Association
   https://www.oralhistory.org

   -International Oral History Association
   https://www.ioha.org

Regional Organizations
   -Michigan Oral History Association
   -Midwest Oral History Group
   -New England Association for Oral History
   -Northwest Oral History Association
   -OHMAR-Oral History Mid-Atlantic Region
   -Southwest Oral History Association
   -Texas Oral History Association

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