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TECHNICAL LEAFLET BUNDLE

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Using Oral History

BNDL012

The voices in your community can provide valuable insights into the past. This bundle will help you capture those voices and use them effectively to help tell stories that will enlighten and engage your audience.

- TL 035 – Tape-Recording Local History (1973)
- TL 123 – Using Oral History for a Family History Project (1980)
- TL 145 – Using Memoirs to Write Local History (1982)
- TL 191 – Using Oral History in Museums (1995)
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technical leaflet



TAPE-RECORDING LOCAL HISTORY

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If only Old Man Smith had written down what he knew about our town!

If only Mr. Jones had told us how it used to be!

Individuals interested in local history have frequently made such comments; undoubtedly they will continue to make them. Similar remarks should become rare in the future, however, because of the opportunities to obtain and preserve, with great convenience, personal, historical information relating to any community. The combination of the *oral interview* and the electronic capabilities of the *tape recorder* enormously facilitate the accumulation and preservation of historical details.

Historians have regularly used interviews to obtain information from individuals. They have been aware of the advantages of using first-hand statements about personal experiences or observations. But to obtain the full value from those interviews, historians had to be skilled in note-taking, or they had to have developed good memories in order to write later the intelligence acquired during the course of the dialog. Now, with the perfection of tape-recording

equipment, the opportunities to obtain information are far more conveniently available.

Recorded information from individuals is described as *oral history*. Many historical societies on the state and local levels have, during the past years, collected and preserved accounts, descriptions, opinions, and reminiscences relating to the area's history. Colleges and universities have also developed oral history programs. Professional organizations of great variety, business and industrial archives, and Presidential libraries as well as collections of other prominent individuals have included oral history materials among their historical resources.

A pioneering oral history project at Columbia University, in operation since 1948, has produced a quantity of first-hand information used by scholars and others for numerous purposes. At the time of its 25th anniversary, the Columbia program introduced an intensive four-week course in oral history providing advanced degree credit in either the History Department or the School of Library Service.

On the local level, the oral history survey, when wisely planned and carefully executed, can provide almost any community with a wealth of historical information not otherwise available. The survey is neither difficult nor expensive nor excessively demanding in the technical sense. It can be a project for any historical society, large or small, and by following a few important principles and suggestions its success can be insured.

There are many applications of the tape recorder in history. Not only can it be used to collect particulars of the past from individuals, but the device can also preserve sounds of the present. Recording equipment can be used to document for the future sounds of transportation, local industry, religious ceremonies, recreational programs, entertainment facilities, and indeed, any local activity in which the audible is more important than the visual. Political gatherings and community meetings, including those of the historical society, also provide opportunities for making recordings for future reference. Tape-recording these community sounds, especially on location, involves sensitive equipment and some technical experience in the proper placing of the microphone or microphones, if these sounds are to be reproduced faithfully and accurately. This is a specialized subject.

PLANNING THE ORAL HISTORY SURVEY

The historical society or other organization planning an oral history survey begins by examining the community in order to consider all aspects of its development as well as all available sources of historical information. Interviews in the survey should not duplicate any available information, whether in manuscript or published form. The oral history survey provides an opportunity for expanding, not reiterating, historical details. Carefully planned interviews with informants who were eyewitnesses to or participants in events of the past can contribute new insights and understanding. Accounts of people's experiences and impressions clarify or give fresh color to episodes theretofore only dimly revealed.

Informants in oral interviews can de-

lineate segments of history that might never be disclosed except in diaries or other autobiographical accounts, personal historical documents that are less common now than in earlier generations. Recorded interviews provide narratives dealing with causes, motivations, and personal relationships. They answer questions about the *how* and *why* of history.

Examining trends and developments in the community will disclose gaps in its historical record and will also indicate subject areas for which potential informants exist. For some subjects there may be several likely informants; for others there might be only a few; and it is equally but unfortunately true that there will be no one to answer some of the questions historians would like to have answered.

Because they have had many experiences and can illuminate many aspects of the local past, the mature, elderly members of the community are usually selected for interviews. They are able to explain *how it used to be* or *what it was like*. Chronological limitations are thus placed on the survey. Few people can speak with much authority on events of more than five or six decades ago. Some informants, however, can relate particulars passed to them from a previous generation: *Daddy told me about that* or *My grandfather told me how he built the mill*. This evidence is not firsthand, but it does supply personal commentaries which enrich the historical record. In a similar way, other individuals can relate local customs and traditions that add to the flavor and appreciation of history.

Do not assume that the only people worth interviewing are old-timers. Some of your best sources of information will be the present-day active business and civic leaders. These individuals have observed or taken part in recent changes in the community. Some have made policies affecting the community's present as well as its future. They are familiar with personalities and with people who made decisions influencing political, economic, and social developments. They can relate the results of outside control on the local industry, changes in marketing practices on area farms, the attempts to organize labor unions or to pre-

vent their formation, the expansion of library facilities, the construction of a super-highway, the development of an athletic arena, and the innumerable affairs which make up the life of a community.

Individuals with prominent careers who spent their formative years in the locality are further possibilities for the oral history survey. Newcomers to the community, especially immigrants or members of minority groups, can relate experiences about their new surroundings that will enrich the understanding of other human endeavors.

A society interested in an innovation or in moving in a new direction could wisely plan to develop an oral history survey. Publicity about the survey would be advantageous to the organization as it furnishes the society with desirable recognition and also because the news accounts may result in turning up for interviews volunteers with worthwhile experiences who might have been overlooked in selecting possible informants. The historical society should not neglect its other responsibilities. It should not allow this relatively new function to hold all its attention but should develop the survey as one phase of its overall program.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

The interview does not take place until you have completed as much research as possible about the topics and the individuals in the interviews. It would be expected that no interviewer would select a local farmer to talk about changes in the community's banking structure. But if either the farmer or the banker is to furnish satisfactory historical evidence, the interviewer must be thoroughly informed about those specific subjects. An unprepared interviewer will not know what questions to ask, or when or whether the interview has thoroughly covered the subject. Nor will he know whether the informant has related accurate or imaginative information. Exhaustive research as a background to the oral history survey cannot be exaggerated. There must be research in the history of the community and in the available sources of information, and there must be a thorough study of the subject matter to be covered by the interview. Only after com-

pleting intensive preparation should the interview begin.

The interviewer aims to obtain complete and accurate information during the conversations; to achieve this goal he must establish a situation that will be conducive to free and uninhibited discussion. The interviewer must constantly strive to obtain from the informant an easy flow of accurate ideas, facts, and statements.

As a preliminary to a propitious interview, the interviewer makes arrangements in advance for the meeting. The interview takes place in surroundings familiar to the informant, but no interviewer could hope for a satisfactory session by appearing at a front door burdened with equipment and announcing he wishes information about the resident's career and accomplishments. The interview should be scheduled three or four days or a week in advance. The interviewer should describe ahead of time the purpose and organization of the survey and should mention the specific topics to be covered as well as the sort of information he wants to obtain. It is even possible to submit a list of the subjects or of the major questions. The informant needs time to prepare for the interview, to review his recollections, and to study any available materials in his possession that may bear on the subjects of the interview. The interviewer must be certain to emphasize firmly that he does not want the informant to read answers or documents during the talk.

When arranging the interview it is also desirable to stress that the historical society is interested in collecting materials only for scholarly research purposes. The society will not make any money from the interviews and very few personal statements of local individuals have cash value. It may also be necessary to explain the historical process in order to answer, *Why does anyone want to know that old stuff?* Historians, it should be made clear, are interested in what may be taken for granted but which can be a significant part of human experience. The interviewer impresses the informant with the importance of collecting and safeguarding primary sources, many of which are individual experiences.

If the overall program of the historical

society or other organization is known in the community, the response will be more sympathetic than if its work is not well known. In the latter case, it may be necessary to give an elaborate explanation of the society's functions and the historical method.

THE INTERVIEW

The first confrontation between questioner and informant resembles a duel: the former thrusts to find out how much knowledge the latter has, while the latter parries to determine how much he can trust his interrogator.

It is necessary to "break the ice" before a satisfactory interview can take place. The interviewer must be patient in his efforts to obtain the informant's confidence, and achieving this aim may take one or several meetings. He also must be aware that no two persons react the same way to his questions and that the same person may react differently in different situations.

The interviewer should recognize that it is human nature for people to be reluctant to admit that they do not know something and for them to avoid what is embarrassing or unpleasant. Individuals, also, are reluctant to talk about subjects which they dislike or which may place them in an unsatisfactory position. Some will exaggerate their own importance to make their actions appear more significant or more commendable than they actually were. Still others have a natural inclination to shock or amuse while claiming to be truthful.

Interviewers must be prepared to handle informants with such personalities as well as individuals who are reluctant to discuss their achievements. Some informants will tell to strangers what they would not reveal to friends or acquaintances. Informants who are especially friendly with the person doing the interview may unconsciously be relating what they think the listener wants to hear rather than the whole truth.

The interviewer must be a good listener and must focus all his attention on the speaker. He must be sympathetic and non-committal at the same time. He must not reflect approval or disapproval. He should not be shocked by the informant's revelations or amused by a display of humor. But a little flattery can be useful for estab-

lishing the all-important rapport between the two partners in the interview. The interviewer should be frank and congenial—qualities he hopes his informant will evince—and he must work to break down natural defenses so the informant will speak freely, completely, and accurately.

Because interviewees may suffer from "mike fright," the interviewer must put his informant at ease before they can start. They can chat together informally, and the interviewer can tell a joke or anecdote to help break the ice. They can discuss irrelevant topics or some subjects on the interview agenda. The interviewer sometimes can help put the informant at ease by demonstrating the equipment, by allowing him to speak into the microphone, and then playing back his voice. The interview will proceed more harmoniously if the interviewer speaks the language as well as the lingo of the informant.

The interview setting should be described on the tape with facts about the location, date, and time of day. Pertinent descriptive details of the informant—age, appearance and other characteristics—can be taped during the interview but preferably immediately after completing it. Before the interview starts there should be an opportunity to make a photograph of the subject, especially if none is readily available. In coming years it may be feasible to prepare a complete document of an interview on color film or videotape to reveal realistically the appearance and personality of the interviewee.

The session should take place at a time when there will be no interruptions. The informant should not be disturbed by telephone calls, visitors, or anything else that would disrupt the session. There should be only two persons present. The presence of more than one interviewer delays in establishing the essential feeling of mutual trust. The interviewing of two informants at the same time could precipitate arguments which would hamper the conversation. Interviewers and informants should be of the same sex, although there are undoubtedly men who are successful in establishing rapport with certain women and vice versa. If the interview is to bring out any sensational subject, the informant is more likely

to reveal it to a person of his own sex. Any sensational or controversial details that are to be discussed should not be introduced during an early part of the interview but should be delayed until mutual trust has been firmly established. Good taste is an important consideration, but truth is the primary concern and nothing should be omitted as being "too personal."

A competent interviewer carefully considers the age and health of the subject. Under the best conditions, two hours should be the limit for an interview, and a conversation of about an hour and a half ought to be adequate. Depending on the circumstances, an even shorter interview might be necessary. A number of interviews, each with a reasonable time limit, is preferable to one or more extended meetings. The informant might prefer and might be able to continue beyond a two-hour limit, but there is a point of diminishing return for both interviewer and interviewee that makes it preferable to return for other sessions.

The chief two methods of obtaining information by interview may be called the "autobiographical" and the "topical." In the autobiographical, the interviewee is encouraged to speak freely and in detail about his experiences and observations. Because he relates incidents as they occur to him, his account will probably be a rambling narrative with many irrelevancies. The advantage in this method is that the informant frequently discloses particulars that he otherwise might not reveal. The interviewee speaks spontaneously, unconstrainedly, and without interruption. The interviewer, after encouraging a straightforward attitude, is not essential to the interview. The interviewer may even be able to leave the tape recorder with the informant, explain its operation, and urge that the latter turn on the equipment and talk whenever some past experiences occur to him.

In the topical approach, however, the interview is limited to specific topics. The interviewer directs the discussion to those subjects and strives to avoid digressions or irrelevant remarks. Careful, thorough research is essential to make this sort of interview productive.

Both methods can produce effective results in an oral history survey. The in-

formant can furnish his autobiography or reminiscences, and the interviewer can focus attention on specific subjects.

The questions an interviewer asks and the way that he asks them can influence the answers he receives. Short, clear questions prevent confusion and are easy to answer. Variations of *Why?*, *How?*, *Why did you do that?*, *Why didn't that work?*, or *What did you do (say) then?* can bring out the sought-for information. A question that does not bring a clear response should be rephrased so that it will not be misinterpreted.

The interviewer also attempts to establish some basic chronology by asking *What year was that?* or *When did that happen?* If the informant cannot supply a date, then the questioner has to try to place the specific event in relation to something else. *Did that take place after what you were just telling me?* *About how long after was it?* *A few months, a year?*

A questioner may ask pointed questions but he should not attempt to put words into the mouth of the informant. He should also refrain from asking a leading question, even though that may appear to be an easy device for directing the discussion into a more fruitful area. *Wasn't the election a significant turning point?* is less desirable than *Was the election a turning point?* or even *Do you consider the election a turning point?*

When the interviewer does not understand an answer, he may repeat the statement with a question in his voice or ask *Is that what you said?* or *Would you mind repeating that last statement, please?* If the interviewer does not wish to break into an explanation, he can at some later time refer to the unclear statement: *The other day (a little while ago) you were saying . . .*

A useful technique is to return in a similar way to a statement that seems to be inaccurate or questionable. When the informant goes over a previous statement, his repetition may reveal discrepancies. The differences may not be differences in fact, however, but only different points of view or interpretations of the same subject.

The interviewer can let the informant know that he plans to cover the same ground with another interviewee. The in-

formant may be pronounced in his opinion—*That so-and-so doesn't know anything about it*—but informants are frequently more careful when they are aware that there will be a check on their statements.

If the interviewer has done adequate research he will be able to distinguish between hearsay offered by the interviewee and statements based on actual experiences. The interview should be conducted so as to emphasize the latter and not the former. There should be an awareness of who was closer to the event and whose conclusions are really impartial.

An interviewer cannot hope to be successful by cross-examining or badgering the informant by saying, for example, *Are you positive you don't remember?* If the meeting is not producing useful material or desired facts, no interviewer should attempt to force information from his subject. Even though satisfactory rapport may once have been established, eliciting details on certain topics may be unproductive. The interviewer can move on to other points and return to the topic another time. If there is a continued lack of success, another interviewer may be more effective in obtaining the sought-for information.

The interviewer in an oral history survey should avoid techniques demonstrated in TV interviews. In those, the interviewer has questions he wants to ask whether the interviewee supplies convincing answers or not. The oral history interviewer may also have questions to ask or points to cover; he should, of course, never read them during the interview. The interviewer can adhere to a chronological order as being helpful to the flow of ideas, but he must be flexible and ignore his planned outline if necessary. The interviewer should follow up points, without badgering, by asking: *What was the effect of that?* or *What happened then?* or *How did that turn out?* The interviewer must be alert to the scope and direction of the discussion, but must also be impassive in his reactions. He must not show surprise, and he must conceal any boredom. He may even find it desirable to establish rapport with other members of the family before and after the actual interview.

The interviewer should ask to have un-

usual or technical words defined. He should also request that the interviewee give the spelling of proper names, if they are not familiar in the community.

SCHOOL PROJECTS

There can be no denial that there are values in having students in either junior or senior high school classes conduct interviews to obtain information about the backgrounds of their community. But there must be recognition of inherent limitations in their activities. Many persons whom they will approach for enlightenment will dislike or disapprove of youngsters questioning them ("prying kids," "young whipper-snappers"). Such attitudes will be difficult handicaps to overcome. Should there be sympathetic individuals in the area, will anything be added to local history by having representatives of school classes return to the same informants year after year? It is also questionable whether students are likely to be well enough prepared to distinguish between historical fact and details stemming from an informant's imagination.

Without belittling the sincere attempts of these students to obtain experience in this significant form of historical research, it must be apparent that their activities might hamper an adult oral history survey. It may be possible for the adult organization to make use of the youthful interests and enthusiasm of younger members or students by letting them help schedule or make arrangements for interviews and even follow up on some aspect of a partially completed interview: *Mr. — has asked if you would be willing to talk to me about your experiences in the strike that you started to tell him the other day?*

If there is no oral history survey in the area, a school program can be a contribution to historical knowledge by following accepted principles and obtaining the willing cooperation of informants. Students can acquire valuable experiences at the same time that they preserve facts which might otherwise be lost.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

When the interview is over, the organization conducting the oral history survey

is faced with the complex problem of what to do with the tape. There are three possible solutions to this problem: keep the tape itself as the only record of the interview, transcribe the information from the tape to permanent written records, and keep both tape and a transcription of the interview.

The least expensive and in many ways the most desirable procedure is to keep the tape itself. By doing this you will preserve not only the content of the interview, but also the voice inflections and emphasis by which the interviewee may have contributed more understanding to his listener. These subtle voice qualities are virtually impossible to put into written form, and without them the future researcher may well misinterpret what was said.

Despite these advantages, there are some precautions that must be observed if the tapes are to be the only record of the interviews. Most authorities recommend, for example, that tapes kept in storage be wound off and re-wound at least once a year to prevent the development within the spools of magnetic fields that could affect the recorded sound. It should also be pointed out that a careless user can erase a tape through improper handling of the playback machine, although a little prudence should eliminate the possibility of this disaster. You might even want to have a technician adjust playback equipment so this cannot happen. One further danger is the mass erasing of reels of tape because of their exposure to a strong magnetic field. This is a remote danger, but special care should be exercised in storing tape to avoid the magnetic fields of electric motors and similar pieces of equipment. With proper care in storage and use, therefore, tape should not present greater preservation problems than ordinary paper records.

If the organization conducting the survey proposes to keep the tapes for use as research tools, they should be accessioned and cataloged just as are other items in the group's collections. The card catalog can include the index to the tape and biographical information about the interviewee. As much cross-indexing as is convenient can be included in the catalog.

Tapes can be indexed so that specific information or statements are easily located by means of tape or *digital counters* which are standard on most recorders. The counter is set at zero (usually 000), and, as the tape is run, someone notes the number for each topic or subject of discussion in the interview.

A tape index might appear as follows:

- 000 Early Youth in ———
- 022 College at ———
- 030 Law School
- 034 World War I
- 055 Tour of South America
- 060 Law Office with ———
- 068 Election of 1928
- 073 County Judge
- 086 ——— Murder Trial
- 104 The '30's
- 117 Work Relief Administrator
- 141 World War II
- 159 Law Office—to 163

A researcher need not listen to the entire tape; he can advance it to the number marking the start of the subject in which he is interested. Other subjects may follow which do not concern the researcher; he may then advance the tape to the number for another subject he is investigating. Locating information on tape is no more difficult than seeking specific dates of micro-filmed newspapers.

In oral history programs on academic and professional levels, information on the tapes is sometimes transcribed into permanent, written form, and the tape is used for new recordings. But transcribing the tapes is an exceedingly time-consuming task, and the cost of equipment and manpower is far greater than the cost of the stored tape. Someone must listen to the interview and write all the words. This chore requires patience and much free time. After copying an interview, someone must edit it carefully; involved clauses need to be straightened and lengthy sentences should be shortened. Such changes to make oral statements readable raise questions of how much editing should be

permitted. If the speaker does not follow accepted rules of grammar, is it legitimate to correct his speaking faults? Should there also be changes in colloquialisms? And what should be done about the speaker's accent or dialect? No transcription, no matter how painstaking and precise, can duplicate the flavor, accents, or individual characteristics of speech. If the taped interview is to be transcribed, it is advisable to preserve a small portion of the interview as a sample of the informant's speaking voice. But in preparing a transcription, the interview narration should be clarified with a minimum of modification.

One reason given for preparing a typescript is that researchers are used to obtaining information from written words; thus it is more convenient for them to read a transcribed interview than to listen to the original on tape. This reason can no longer be supported, because information of all sorts, including historical, will in the future be presented in a great variety of forms, such as computerized tapes, printouts, punch cards, miniaturized printing, and other complex systems. The researcher can no longer expect to work only with handwritten or printed documents.

A further argument for transcribing the tape is that it allows the person who provided the material an opportunity to review what he said during the interview. He has an additional chance for supplying details that he might not have considered during the course of the interview. A competent interviewer, however, would have explored all possible avenues of thought and allowed sufficient opportunity to contribute further pertinent facts. The chance for the interviewee to read his narrative may make him want to revise his original frank and, possibly, profane comments.

After a typescript has been prepared and wisely edited and the speaker has read it, he should be willing to sign a statement that he supplied the foregoing information and makes it available to the historical society for research purposes. He may impose reasonable restrictions on its use, such as not allowing research in the material until after his death. A similar signed release should accompany the tape if it is to

be preserved. If the interviewer is to listen to the entire interview to confirm his remarks, that will take much more time than reading a typescript. Any changes in a typescript would be apparent. "Editing" a tape can be done so skillfully that opposite opinions can be presented. If the interviewee says *the plan was not carefully conceived*, it takes just a little experience to remove the *not*. It requires only a bit more to remove the negative from another part of the interview to change what had been a positive statement. It is difficult to know why persons of integrity interested in scholarly pursuits should want to distort taped information, but it is possible; and custodians of the source materials should be aware of those dangers.

EQUIPMENT

The fact that the oral history survey involves the use of electronic equipment should not discourage anyone from undertaking this method of historical research. Tape recorders are convenient to transport and simple to operate. As a result of current marketing practices, there is certain to be someone connected with the historical agency or with the local educational system who can supply advice, based on experience, on the purchase and use of tape-recording equipment.

Purchase of the necessary equipment from a reputable dealer in *sound and high-fidelity* supplies (recording equipment, short wave, TV, etc.) is preferable to acquiring the materials from an electrical *appliance* dealer. The prospective purchaser should plan to obtain the most suitable equipment at the lowest price. He may have to make a compromise between a low purchase price and adequate maintenance service. It is no saving to buy at a discount and then to have to ship the machine away for repairs and be unable to use it for some weeks. If you plan a schedule of interviews over a period of time, it would be advantageous to have access to more than one recorder. Cancelling or postponing an interview because no recorder is available would hardly be in the best interests of the survey.

The two basic types of tape recorders are

reel-to-reel and *cassette*. Both have advantages and disadvantages, and the potential purchaser should evaluate carefully the available models of each type to determine which better satisfies the needs of his oral history program.

(A third type of recorder is the *cartridge*. The primary use of this form of equipment is to record, or to play back pre-recorded musical tapes. Pre-recorded reel-to-reel and cassette tapes are also available, but the *eight-track cartridge* is, at present, the most popular version for tape recorded music.)

The *reel-to-reel* recorder, the original form, is usually more durable and dependable than the newer device. It records with greater fidelity and makes possible the use of tapes of various sizes and qualities. The "open" reel features of these various machines also makes it possible to edit the tape—an action that may not be a desirable part of oral history. Nevertheless, there may be portions of a taped interview with long pauses, where the tape is blank, or portions of the tape that may be garbled or suffer from extraneous noises that may legitimately be removed by editing.

The *cassette recorder* is lighter and more compact and can be operated much more easily than the original form of the tape recorder. Cassette tape is encased in its own plastic container that is inserted in the recording machine, thus eliminating the necessity of threading the tape from the reel of tape to a takeup reel. Because of their size and method of operation, cassette recorders are less expensive than are reel-to-reel models. Many good cassette recorders are available for less than \$100 while a satisfactory reel-to-reel machine now costs as much as \$175.

A tape recorder basically consists of an electric motor which moves past a recording *head* a *tape* coated with iron oxide. The head is nothing more than an electromagnet, which changes sound signals fed to it into magnetic impulses which arrange the oxide particles on the tape into an equivalent pattern of sound. A playback head can then "read" the pattern of sound on the tape and feed it to an amplifier which will reproduce what was

originally recorded. Most tape recorders have amplifiers built into the equipment so that it is possible to record and play back with the one unit. Recording equipment that does not have a built-in amplifier is called a *tape-deck*. If you have access to a separate amplifier with provision for *tape input*, you can buy better quality taping equipment at a lower cost than you would have to pay for the combination machine. As an amplifier is rarely portable, it should be pointed out that with a tape deck, it may be impossible to play back to the interviewee any of the discussion except through earphones.

All tape recorders have a minimum of two heads, but it is important to purchase equipment with at least three so that they will do more satisfactorily the three separate functions of recording, playing back, and *erasing*, or eliminating from the tape the previous signal before recording a new one.

Other standards to consider when selecting a recorder are: its *frequency response*, *signal-to-noise ratio*, and *wow-and-flutter* of the tape transport system. Frequency response is not significant when recording conversations because of the limited range of the speaking voice. It is important for a collection of documentary sounds or music, however, because it is then desirable to record as much as possible of the full frequency range of the original. For those purposes a tape recorder should have a minimum frequency response of 50 to 15,000 cps (cycles per second) with an indicated change in the specifications of not more than plus or minus 2 or 3 decibels. Although the frequency response for interviews is not important, a low signal-to-noise ratio is desirable if the recording is to be clear and not have distracting tape or other noises. The motor should operate as closely as possible to a constant speed and its wow-and-flutter rating should be less than 0.25 per cent. A good test for motor performance is to record some piano chords and compare the quality of the playback with the original.

When recording, it is necessary to know the amount, or volume, of the signal getting on the tape. A soft voice or a voice a distance from the microphone will require

adjusting volume controls higher than for a person who speaks loudly or who is near the microphone. (Information about volume controls is included in the usual operating directions.) However, the person making the recording needs to know if there is sufficient volume so the tape can be plainly heard when played back; he must also know whether there is too much signal reaching the tape, in which case there will be distortion. A *neon light or magic eye* is one form of device to indicate if there is distortion. A *VU meter*, with needle and scale, shows the level of recording volume so necessary adjustments can be made to achieve the proper range. The interviewer should be familiar with the sensitivity and accuracy of these devices so that he can set the volume at a satisfactory level and not have to make frequent adjustments or watch the gauges. Many portable (battery) recorders are equipped with automatic volume controls, and are good for recording conversations.

For many years, portable tape recorders operated at only two speeds: 7½ inches per second and 3¾ ips. With recent improvements in the quality of tape, recorders can now be operated at speeds of 1½ ips and even 15-16 ips. With slower speeds, there is some additional tape noise and also a loss in the treble responses, but the average ear cannot distinguish between voices recorded at 3¾ ips or at 1½. The slower speeds increase the use of the tape. As the speed is cut in half, the playing time for any given length of tape doubles.

Cassette tape recorders, however, operate at only one speed. Although a reel-to-reel recorder may have a variety of speeds, there is a definite advantage in agreeing to use a uniform speed in the oral history program. Selecting and adhering to one speed—preferably 3¾ ips—makes for consistency so that persons making the recording and those using it know the speed to expect.

Tapes are reversible, which means the playing time for the length of tape is increased. Some reel-to-reel recorders reverse the tape automatically so that an additional track of sound is put on the tape without changing reels. Cassettes can be turned over conveniently to permit the

interview to progress with little interruption. Some recorders are equipped with automatic shut-off to turn off the equipment when all the tape has passed to the take-up reel. A desirable feature of a cassette recorder is an end-alarm—a buzzing signal that sounds at the end of the tape to indicate that the cassette should be turned over or replaced. Other desirable features on the recording equipment are a fast forward, to advance the tape rapidly, and a rewind, to return it.

Tape recorders operate on household electricity which is generally available everywhere. There are times when the interviewer may have to hunt around for an outlet, however, and he should come equipped with an extension cord so the interview can take place at a convenient spot where he will not have to worry about the apparatus. It is also possible to obtain *battery-operated* recorders of a high quality. These are light, compact, and versatile. Some, however, are only toys and are not satisfactory for interview purposes. There are some compromises in battery-operated equipment. One of them is the use of a small speaker which means the playback tones will not be as full as from larger models.

The use and selection of batteries is important, as a recording session would be disrupted if batteries were to go dead. The interviewer should have experience with batteries and be able to judge their life. It is not necessary to use fresh batteries for every interview, but the interviewer should not start out with batteries that have had several hours use. Cadmium batteries are rechargeable, but charging takes time and the recorder cannot be used without the power supply. It is advisable for any battery-operated portable to be equipped for operation on ordinary AC power, in order to save the batteries when electrical current is handy.

The purchaser of a tape recorder should not be satisfied just to listen to a demonstration tape at the dealers. He should try out all its operations and even make a test tape himself. Two machines can be tested by placing their microphones side by side and having a person speak while walking

away from and then toward the microphone. Any differences in quality of the equipment would be audible when playing back the tape. The person making the test should never base a decision on a recording of his own voice.

Recording *tape* comes in various sizes, qualities and prices. In general, the chief differences are in the materials used for the *base* for the tape and in its brand name. *Acetate*, the original material for the base of sound tape, is the cheaper. It reacts with sensitivity to changes in temperature and humidity, but when these can be controlled, acetate tape can have a long life. *Polyester* tape has been perfected more recently, and is sometimes known by the trade name *Mylar*. Polyester tapes resist atmospheric changes, but have a tendency to stretch with consequent sound distortion. This characteristic of polyester tape can be eliminated by pre-stretching, and the resulting tape is identified as *tempered* or *tensitized*. These tapes are the most expensive.

Tape is one-quarter inch wide but is made in various thicknesses: $\frac{1}{8}$ mil, 1 mil, and $\frac{5}{8}$ mil. The thinner the tape, the more can be placed on a reel, so that the playing time for each track can be increased. Also available are special types of *slow-speed* tape, and tapes to meet specific requirements, such as *low noise* tape to overcome the *hiss* sound tapes make passing over the heads and *high output* to allow the tape to carry a stronger signal.

Reel-to-reel tape, depending on the thickness of the tape and on the size of the reel, is available on reels from 3" to 10½" in diameter and may have lengths from 150' to 3600'. Playing time, at 3¾ ips, would be from 7½ minutes to three hours per side. The preferable reel sizes, however, are 5" and 7" with tape lengths from 900' to 2400'. Reel-to-reel tape is usually measured by the length of tape on the reel, and the playing time determined by the speed at which the machine is operated. Cassette tape is identified by the playing times, which are 30, 60, 90, and 120 minutes for *both sides* of the tape. For oral history purposes, the 60 and 90 minute lengths are considered most appropriate.

Tape purchasers will find a quantity of brand name tapes, and also *unbranded* tapes. In addition to tapes sold under the standard names, manufacturers produce tape for local distribution at a lower price. A store, or chain of stores, often can buy standard tapes and sell them under its own name, often packaged more cheaply. Some of the non-standard tapes may be seconds or rejects, but not necessarily. Some unbranded tape may be inferior in quality and consist of discarded broadcasting tape that has had considerable use. Unbranded tape has also been made from computer tape, which must be *slit* carefully to be satisfactory for recording purposes. If the side of the reel of tape is not smooth and glossy the slitting has been uneven. Some experts have declared that second-quality tape now is superior to the first-line tape produced a few years ago. The organization planning to purchase and use tape in quantity should experiment to find the kind that is satisfactory in both quality and price. A test can be made by splicing together several short pieces and comparing the amount of noise and the fidelity on each.

A *microphone* is usually included with the recorder, but the purchase of a separate one can improve the quality of voices in the recorded interviews. If the society plans an audio-history program of community sounds, it should purchase a microphone with the greatest frequency range it can afford. For speaking voices only, a microphone with a range of 60 to 7000 is adequate. Some microphones come equipped with an *on-off switch* which is a convenience in recording interviews. When the interviewee says, *I'll have to think about that for a while*, the interviewer can unobtrusively reach to the microphone and turn off the switch instead of allowing the tape to run or having to stretch for the machine. When the person is ready to resume speaking, it is simple to turn on the microphone switch. Some recorders are *voice-activated* and start the tape only when a person speaks; the recorder stops when voices are silent.

There are two general classes of microphones: *non-directional* (or *omni-directional*) and *unidirectional*. Those with the

former quality pick up a signal equally well from all directions while the latter are sensitive to sound from only one direction: directly in front. Microphones must match the *impedance* of the recorder. Most recorders for non-professional use have a high impedance, which requires that the microphone be no farther than fifteen feet from the recorder. If it should be necessary to place the microphone a greater distance away, then a low impedance microphone would be used with a transformer to boost the impedance to match the recorder.

Earphones, or *headphones*, are essential pieces of equipment when editing tape. They are also necessary for researchers to use when playing tape, and the recorder should be equipped with *output jack* for earphones. Clarity of sound in the earphones and their comfort on the head are important considerations when selecting this accessory. Some models come with washable ear-cushions, which is an advantage if the earphones will have frequent use. When transcribing tape, earphones are useful and a *foot pedal* is desirable. Pressure on the foot pedal attached to the recorder starts or stops the tape so hands are free for writing or typing.

Other necessary accessories for tape recording include head cleaning fluid, and alcohol to clean the rubber capstan roller which drives the tape. A tape-splicer for editing is an added convenience. A *head-demagnetizer* reduces the magnetization of the recorder's heads resulting from tape passing over them. A *magnetic bulk-eraser* erases sounds from a tape in a few seconds and is an easier and better way to erase tape than running it through a recorder.

Catalogs of sound and electronics equipment supplies have information about these and other useful items. Periodicals about high-fidelity subjects contain articles and advertisements about techniques or products that will aid in ensuring the success of an oral history survey.

FOR FURTHER READING

Individuals and organizations planning oral history programs should be familiar with the following:

Baum, Willa K. *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1971.

Waserman, Manfred J. *Bibliography on Oral History*. New York: The Oral History Association, 1971. Available from the O.H.A. at Box 20, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, New York 10027.

William G. Tyrrell has been Chief of Historic Site Management in the New York State Division for Historic Preservation since 1967. From 1948 to 1972, he regularly evaluated audio-visual materials for *History News* and other publications of the AASLH. He is the author of a textbook on New York state history and government and of many other publications, articles, and reviews on historical subjects and teaching methods.



TECHNICAL LEAFLET 35

Technical leaflets are published by the American Association for State and Local History for the purpose of bringing useful information to persons working in the state and local history movement. The series does not follow the same categories month after month,

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American Association for State and Local History

Technical LEAFLET

Using Oral History For a Family History Project

Linda Shopes
University of Maryland Baltimore County

Introduction

Imagine listening to an elderly relative tell of her journey to America as an immigrant, her arrival at Ellis Island, and her first job in a clothing factory. Or imagine another family member describing how he worked on the family farm, learned to read in a one-room school house, and courted his wife at church socials. Such are the opportunities available to the family historian who draws upon the method of oral history.

Traditionally, family history has been equated with genealogy, the reconstruction of a person's lineage through the use of written records. However, the stories family members tell about their past are also a rich source of information on a family's history. In particular, they can yield information about motives and attitudes and the "feeling tone" of life that even the most extensive genealogical reconstruction lacks. Enlarging the notion of family history to include information gathered from oral sources also encourages people to investigate their pasts even though extensive genealogical records are not available.

The personal benefits of such an investigation are numerous. For subsequent generations of the

family, who frequently lack significant contact with extended relatives and so have little knowledge of "where they came from," a collection of taped interviews is a rich inheritance. For people who are interviewed, particularly older people, reviewing their life experiences and trying to order them and articulate their significance can be a rewarding experience.

But it is for the family researcher that such a project perhaps has the greatest value. It can be the impetus for developing or deepening relationships with other family members. Even more important, it can enhance one's own sense of identity. By tying together the strands of the family history and trying to understand the meaning of individual lives in relation to the social and historical context within which they were lived, family historians can gain perspective on the context of their own lives.

This notion of family history as moving beyond the domain of the genealogist is supported by several recent developments in historical study. Since the 1960s, historians increasingly have sought to understand the daily life experiences of ordinary people. They have paid particular attention to the history of the

family since it is so fundamental a social institution and shapes so much of people's daily lives. Oral history, too, has emerged in recent years as a method of historical research. Though by no means limited to the study of ordinary people, oral history interviews are especially valuable as a source of information about those individuals and groups for whom the written record is both scant and misleading.

Doing Background Research

Although oral history interviews may lie at the heart of a family history research project, they must be preceded by careful preparation if they are to be of much value. Before doing any interviewing, the family historian needs to assemble basic data on individual family members and then locate those individual lives within their broader historical context. This background information will give the researcher some idea what to interview family members about and will enable the interviewer to ask more thoughtful and searching questions during the interview itself.

Though the researcher may know some of this information already, especially about immediate family members, a good deal more can be gathered by research into both primary and secondary written sources. A good place to begin this research is the family *Bible*. In addition, in almost every family there is someone who has an old shoe box full of miscellaneous family papers such as school diplomas, old letters, and tax records. These need to be located and examined for information. Family photographs and material objects are especially interesting. Sensitively interpreted, they can suggest much about "what life was like" years ago. Also available to the family researcher are the kinds of public documents used by genealogists—birth, marriage, and death records, wills, censuses, immigrant passenger lists.

By drawing upon a number of these personal and public documents, the family researcher can begin to understand the basic pattern of events in family members' lives—when and where they were born, educated, and married, residential and occupational histories, the children born to them. It is useful to assemble this data on a single form for each family member being researched; a sample form is illustrated above. It also should be noted that background data might fruitfully be gathered for deceased relatives. Not only will it make the family history more complete, but also it can help stimulate recollections about these people during interviews with their relatives and close friends.

Once some background information about

Name	
Date of Birth	Place of Birth
Mother's Name (include maiden name)	
Father's Name	
Siblings' Names (include birthdates if known)	
Spouse's Name (include wife's maiden name)	
Date of Marriage	Place of Marriage
Children's Names (include dates and places of birth)	
Date of Death	
Place of Death and Burial	
Religion and Church Membership	
Schooling and/or Other Training (list all schools attended, the dates of attendance, and the level of education completed at each)	
Residential History (list all residences chronologically, noting the dates lived at each)	
Occupational History (list all occupations chronologically, noting the place of work, the type of work done there, and the approximate salary)	
Membership in Clubs and Organizations (note dates of membership and offices held)	

Above is a sample form for recording family data. A separate form should be completed for each member of the family.

family members has been gathered, the next step for the family researcher is to try to understand these individual lives in relation to the social circumstances that affected them. This kind of understanding will add depth to the interview and may help the researcher perceive the family's history as something more than a collection of individual biographies. Thus, an afternoon spent in the local historical society or the local history section of the library might yield not only specific information about individual ancestors, but also a clearer sense of the historical setting within which these ancestors lived. Also useful are general accounts of American history and specific studies of historical events and processes like immigration or the Depression that may have affected family members. Biographies, particularly some of the more recent biographies of ordinary Americans based largely on oral sources, are yet another possible source of insight. The number of such works is enormous, but a local librarian or college history instructor might be able to make some useful suggestions for background reading relevant to individual families.

Determining a Focus

After gathering biographical data on family members and researching the general background of the family history, the family historian then needs to decide what direction the



Commonwealth Heritage Project

Photographs and legal documents are two of the many sources for uncovering background information prior to interviewing family members.

Standard Case Marriage Record 1880-1900

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, } sec. Socket # 31
County of Luzerne.

I, Helen A. O'Connor Clerk of the Orphans Court in and for the County above
do hereby certify that the following is a true and correct copy of the records relating to the marriage of
Joseph Shopen and Hellie Ansdanckan
as full and entire as the records in said office contain
No. 52210 name Joseph Shopen Date of Birth Prussia
Married March 25, 1882 Residence at Wilkes-Barre, Pa.
occupation Bar tender DOB not stated before
name Hellie Ansdanckan Date of Birth Prussia
Married 1887 Residence at Pittston, Pa.
occupation Servant DOB not stated before
Marriage License issued April 27, 1909 Married May 4, 1909
Married by Rev. Ansdanckan at Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

BY MYSELF WHEREOF I have taken as my Seal and Official Seal, at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, this 3rd day of November

A. D. 1875. Helen A. O'Connor
Mary Frances O'Brien
Clerk of the Orphans Court

interviews will take. Possible areas of inquiry fall within three broad categories: the impact of major historical events and trends such as racial segregation, technological developments, or the post World War II housing boom on the family; the relationship of various aspects of social life such as work, religion, community life, or class status and mobility to individuals within the family; and the structure and dynamics of family life itself, including household membership, relationships among family members, and family values. A fourth area of

inquiry is suggested by family folklorists who are concerned not so much with the content of a family's history as with the forms a family uses to preserve its experiences. Thus, the family researcher also might collect family stories, traditions, customs, and beliefs.

Since the number of possible topics and subtopics within each of these broad categories is enormous, it is advisable to focus on a few main themes that seem most relevant to the family's experience; otherwise, the information gathered will be a random collection of

unrelated facts, anecdotes, and insights. These themes, however, should only be tentative. The family historian needs to be aware that interviewees themselves may open up new areas of inquiry, new ways of understanding the family history.

Conducting the Interviews

Once some background research is done and a general focus for the investigation is determined, the family researcher is ready to begin interviewing. Choose for first interviews those family members with whom you feel most comfortable and who seem to enjoy talking about the past. If these interviews are successful, less enthusiastic family members might be encouraged to participate. In addition, the interviewer will have acquired skill in interview techniques before dealing with more difficult situations. Of course, common sense dictates that the oldest family members be interviewed first.

After selecting persons to interview, the family historian needs to consider very carefully how to encourage extensive and thoughtful recall from the interviewees. An interview is above all a social interaction; if it is awkward and tense, no matter how carefully researched, it will be intellectually and personally unrewarding.

The interviewer needs to contact the interviewees and explain the purpose of the interview, acquire additional biographical data if necessary, explore possible topics for the interviews, and in general encourage the subjects to begin thinking about their own and the family's history. A good technique is to review old photographs and documents with the interviewees for they are often valuable memory jogs. It also might be interesting to take the people back to scenes from their earlier years—former homes, schools, churches, places of employment—as a way of stimulating additional memories.

Based on this pre-interview conversation, as well as the background research and the general focus determined for the project, the family historian next needs to prepare an outline of topics to pursue during the interviews. Interviews can be structured autobiographically, so that the interviewees are guided into giving a chronological account of their lives, or topically, so that only certain aspects of their experiences are probed. The best family history interviews are probably a combination of autobiographical and topical narratives, though the individual researcher needs to decide which method best suits the previously established purposes.

The outline for the interviews should facilitate recall, not inhibit it. It is not a list of "twenty questions" to which the interviewer rigidly adheres, but a list of topics and subtopics to give direction to the interviews. It is important to emphasize, however, that the interviewer needs to have a clear sense of the categories of information to be sought; otherwise, it is easy to become overwhelmed by a welter of disparate facts and wandering recollections. Trying to compress the highlights of some fifty, seventy, or even ninety years of living into a few hours of a taped interview is, after all, a difficult task and demands considerable forethought.

During the interviews, the interviewer needs to encourage a mood of expansiveness in the subjects so that they are stimulated to recount life experiences openly and on their own terms. The best way to do this is to ask open-ended questions that can be developed at length by the interviewees. However, questions should not be so broad or complex that the interviewees do not know where to begin an answer. For example, suppose the interviewer wants to learn about the interviewee's childhood. A closed question like "When and where were you born?" does not allow room for elaboration upon experiences. Yet a too open statement like "Tell me about your childhood—your family, your school experiences, what your community was like—anything that you can remember" might simply elicit a few bits and pieces of information with no real focus. A better way to probe childhood experiences would be to say, "I understand you were born in Baltimore in 1905 to parents who had recently immigrated to this country [all this information having been learned from the background research done before the interview]. Tell me something about this family that you were born into."

Follow-up questions on what an interviewee has just said can encourage yet additional recall. Thus, to refer to the example above, depending upon how the interviewee has answered the question about the family, the interviewer can dig for details about the economic circumstances, emotional climate, the roles and responsibilities of each parent, the children's place in the family, and so forth. Then the researcher can go on to ask questions about other aspects of the interviewee's childhood such as school experiences and the community lived in. In all cases, each topic should be explored as completely as possible before moving on to another. If the interviewee wanders off the track, the interviewer can simply return to the subject by saying something like, "Before getting into the subject of your school experiences, I'd



Main Street, USA, in the early twentieth century. Photographs like this one, besides illustrating the context of a family's life, can be powerful jogs to memories about life in years past.

like to learn some more about your family. Tell me something about what your mother did in the home."

Throughout the interviews, the interviewer should play the role of "active listener," gently guiding and encouraging the interviewees' recollections but never intruding upon them. Thus, questions should be unbiased; they should be phrased in such a way that no particular answer seems expected. "Tell me more about . . .," "Why do you think that . . .," and "Give me an example of . . .," are all good ways to draw out an interviewee even on fairly sensitive or controversial topics. On the other hand, phrases like "Don't you agree that . . ." or "Isn't it true that . . ." are likely to inhibit all but the most assertive interviewees. Interviewers also should refrain from commenting favorably or unfavorably on what the interviewees say. Good rapport can be maintained nonverbally by eye contact, nods and smiles, an intent expression, and a relaxed body position and verbally by an occasional non-committal "I understand" or "I see."

It is important also not to inhibit interviewees by interrupting once they have started to answer questions. Let them unfold the logic of their lives as they choose. Clarification and examples can be elicited after the original question is answered. It is a good idea to have a pad and pencil handy during interviews to jot down notes for these follow-up questions.

The interviewer should also be certain that the interviewees actually have finished answering a question before asking another. Pauses in narration, though uncomfortable for an eager interviewer, often signal efforts to gather additional thoughts on a topic, not the end of thought on it. The interviewer should keep in mind that generally the best interviews are those in which the interviewer says the least.

The setting of interviews can help nurture recall, and the interviewer should pay attention to this detail of the interview process also. Interviews should take place where those being questioned are most comfortable and used to talking informally; usually this means their own home—perhaps in the living room, but more



Lyle Embree

During the early twentieth century, a farmer's team of horses may have been his most valuable possession. Such a photograph may suggest to the researcher a number of questions or may spark memories in the interviewee.

often in the den, kitchen, or back yard. Wherever the interviews take place, they should be free of interruptions and distractions that might break the interviewees' concentration. They should also be free of background noise—nothing makes a tape harder to understand than the regular creaking of a rocking chair or the steady hum of an air conditioner. Interviewer and interviewee should sit close enough to one another to maintain eye contact easily. The tape recorder microphone should be directed toward the interviewee, and the recorder itself, which the interviewer is completely at ease with operating, should be near the interviewer so that tapes can be changed unobtrusively as necessary.

Though oral historians generally agree that maximum rapport is gained by interviewing only one person at a time, sometimes talking with a small group of family members about old times is an especially enjoyable and valuable experience that provides considerable information as individuals trigger each other's memories and spur one another on. A group interview also may provide insight into patterns of interaction among family members and may highlight differences and similarities among family members' individual experiences. A group session is perhaps best used in conjunction with more extensive individual interviews.

Because interviews are often exhilarating experiences for both interviewer and interviewee, the interviewer should take care not to end abruptly, but rather ask one or two deflationary questions at the end of the interview and then spend a few minutes visiting

with the interviewee once it is over. They are also tiring, and two hours generally seems to be the limit for a single productive session.

A Word of Caution

Although interviewing family members is usually a mutually rewarding experience, sometimes certain problems arise. Some potential interviewees, schooled in the great-men-and-events version of history, have difficulty understanding that the story of their life experiences is of particular interest to anyone and so have little enthusiasm for a family history project. Others are simply unwilling to speak candidly about what they feel is personal and, therefore, private. Other difficulties can arise. Pain over a deceased relative, embarrassment at a youthful indiscretion, efforts by estranged relatives to get the interviewer "on their side," and attempts by an interviewee to present only "the good side" of the family history have all been encountered by family historians. There is no single solution to handling any of these problems, but tact, persistence, and a sensitivity to this human dimension of family history research are the best guides.

The very human quality of oral testimony raises particularly complex questions about its validity as a historical document. Memories do fade over the years, and it is difficult for most people to be objective about their own experiences. However, the mood the interviewer creates during the interview itself and the creativity of questions can affect significantly the candor of the interviewee's recollections. It is also important for the interviewer to do background research and interview several

family members about the family history in order to judge the veracity of any single account. But what is most important is to accept all interviewees' interpretations of their lives as their interpretation. Oral testimony, like any other historical source, needs to be evaluated both for its factual accuracy and for what it reveals about the attitudes and values of the interviewee.

After the Interview

The family historian may well feel that a collection of documents and taped interviews is an adequate record of the family history. This material, however, should be organized in some way to facilitate access. A filing system, with individual files containing all pertinent information for each relative, coupled with a carefully labeled set of tapes, is perhaps the simplest way to organize a collection. A more complex filing system, by theme or by time period, may be necessary for more ambitious projects. It should be noted, however, that transcribing the tapes or making a running index of what is discussed on each tape makes retrieval of information considerably easier.

The family historian also may wish to organize and interpret more completely the data collected, write up a family history, and circulate it among family members. It might be well also to consider placing a copy of the completed paper in the local historical society or library so that future researchers may have the benefit of the work. If a written family history goes outside the hands of the immediate family, the family historian is advised to secure written permission from the interviewees for researchers to draw upon information contained in their tapes.

Conclusion

A family history project may seem to be enormously ambitious. Certainly, the methods outlined in this pamphlet can be adapted to fit specific situations. Considerable background research and a pre-interview conversation may not always be possible before each interview. Interviewing itself becomes easier as the interviewer gains experience. Careful organization of data, too, can wait for a later date. In the end, perhaps the best advice is simply to START.

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American Association for State and Local History

Technical **LEAFLET**

Using Memoirs to Write Local History

By Elizabeth Y. Enstam



"Tell me about when you were little," a grandchild begs, and her grandfather sits down to reminisce. His remembrances may grow into written memoirs and become a rich source for the local historian. Often memoirs offer detailed information that is not available elsewhere. All writers of memoirs are self-conscious to some degree; that is, they expect what they recall to be read. Responding to requests by children, grandchildren or close friends, the writers of memoirs know that their experiences are significant to others; for this reason, they make a special effort to preserve materials too frequently omitted from other records.

People who write memoirs reflect upon their times and seek to relate their experiences to specific political and military events or to cultural and social situations. Thus, while memoirs do create certain problems for the researcher, they are, as Francis Russell Hart has observed, the most historical of all the personal sources. A letter writer, for example, assumes that the recipient knows the circumstances or causes of events and is familiar with the procedures of everyday life. Diaries and journals give a real sense of having known the writer, but because they are personal records kept for personal reasons, they rarely include details of ordinary things.

Memoirs, however, record the routine, everyday memories needed to reconstruct the reality of life in the past.

The terms "memoirs" and "autobiography" are frequently used interchangeably, but the two are not the same. An autobiography is a complete life history. Memoirs record a significant life period or a particular aspect of the writer's life. Other memoirs are simply a collection of memories. In fact, the word "memoirs" is too formal for many written personal memories. More accurate terms are "recollections," "reminiscences" or just "memories."

Though all the memoirs used as examples in this leaflet concern the history of Dallas and Dallas County, Texas, between 1842 and 1900, almost any area of the United States is likely to have most, if not all, of the forms of memoirs discussed below.

Types of memoirs

Preserved by families or deposited in libraries and in the archives of local historical societies, local memoirs vary in form and length—from complete books to a few handwritten paragraphs to any number of unbound typed pages. Usually, they have an informal style of writing and somewhat disorganized content that rambles from one topic to another much as memory itself works, inspired randomly by some phrase, word or chance recollection.

Some memoirs are preserved as taped interviews conducted by oral historians. (See AASLH Technical Leaflet 123, "Using Oral History for a Family Project.") Others are sprinkled through autobiographies and local histories written by early residents. Some local histories, in fact, are based so much on the writers' own experiences and memories that they are more memoirs than works of history. Memoirs also include memories published in newspaper columns by journalists who interview elderly residents about their families or their own lives, preserving colorful bits of history often missed or ignored by historians.

Whatever their form, all memoirs focus on one or more aspects of personal life and experience, either in the author's life or in the local area's past. Sometimes they have only one topic—an individual's memories of some catastrophe, an illness or injury overcome, the local effects of a national event. Others reconstruct a whole way of life, meticulously recalling details of everyday life and work. When they provide an eyewitness account, memoirs are primary sources. If they record what the writer was told, memoirs must be

classified as secondary sources, even when they provide a contemporary account.

This leaflet deals with four topics regarding the use of memoirs to write local history: finding memoirs and securing permission to use them; information that memoirs offer local historians; the problems of using memoirs as a historical source, especially the problem of checking their accuracy; and the problems and value of the subjective nature of the materials available in memoirs.

Finding memoirs and getting permission to use them

Research often involves a good deal of sleuthing to locate historical sources, but it is relatively easy to find memoirs. Local history collections in public libraries include memoirs; in fact, memoirs are often shelved in the general collection under biography or autobiography. For this reason, it is a good idea simply to survey the card catalog for books about the local area, and then select those that are memoirs or that might contain the personal memories of the writer. Memoirs available in libraries and archives are often published and copyrighted by the author or the author's family. Quote and cite memoirs like any other published source.

Local historical and genealogical societies sometimes publish memoirs in their newsletters or journals. Local historical organizations have more personal relationships with an author or an author's family than commercial publishing houses or university presses have. Therefore, check with the editor of the newsletter or journal to see if the author or the author's family wishes to restrict use of the materials. Otherwise, cite and quote the reference in the regular way.

When the memoirs exist only as an unpublished manuscript, quoting from them for publication can be more complicated. If the manuscript is in a library or archives collection, the librarians or archivists will know whether the manuscript belongs to the institution or to the writer's family and whether there are restrictions on its use. Usually, you can use and cite any manuscript in a library or archives, though manuscripts in closed collections are not available to researchers. If the manuscript belongs to the library or archives, indicate that fact in your citation.

Another source for memories are personal interviews. If you record memories of local people, be sure they know their information will be used in a publication. Also tell them the purpose of the publication. Ask each person being interviewed to sign a release form or at

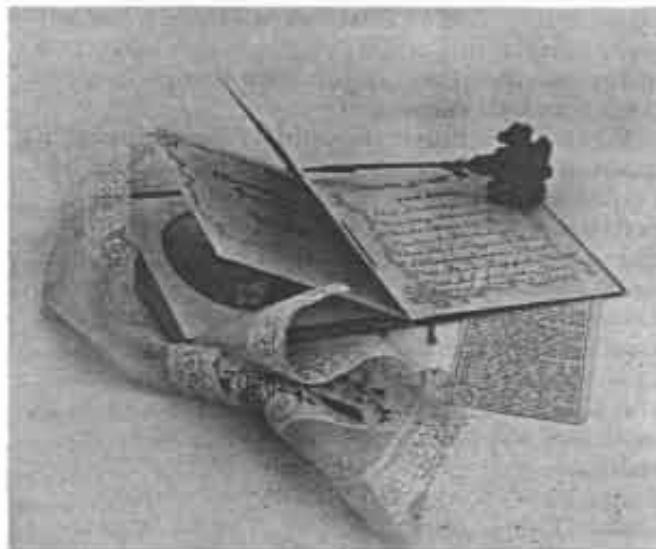
least give written permission for the interview to be used in the publication. This routine procedure protects both parties, ensuring the researcher's right to use the materials and the source's right to accurately credit his or her information. Organizations like the Oral History Association have standard release forms. Libraries and archives develop their own forms, and you can use the forms as a guide for your own research.

Sometimes you will find unpublished memoirs quite by accident through personal contacts. A family may save a handwritten memoir for sentimental reasons, never dreaming that it has historical value, especially if it concerned day-to-day life instead of a war or politics. Casual conversations with friends, with members of a historical or genealogical society, or with other persons interested in local history lead you to these memoirs—someone knows someone who knows someone who treasures the yellowed pages written many years ago by her great-great-grandmother. Finding such a manuscript and being allowed to use it is exciting, but such good fortune is unplanned—it comes as a gift.

Three basics to remember

In short, there are three basic legal points to remember when you use memoirs. First, carefully document factual information and the author's original ideas. This helps you conform to basic scholarship rules and legally protects you from plagiarism. Second, it is important to have clear permission to use unpublished materials for a specific purpose and to note their ownership as part of the documentation. For complex questions about the legal use of published and unpublished historical sources, the best guide to the United States copyright law of 1976 is Donald F. Johnston's *Copyright Handbook* (New York: R.R. Bowker & Company, 1978). Intended for use by publishers, librarians, educators and authors as well as attorneys, the *Copyright Handbook* clearly explains the complicated provisions of the most recent copyright law.

The third basic point concerns responsible scholarship as well as legal protection. It is very important not to push the facts into unwarranted or extreme conclusions in order to prove your pet theory or "spice up" a story. "Reading between the lines" is essentially a careless approach to the past, and it can insult, hurt or slander an individual or a family. On the other hand, family members may become too concerned about the way material from the unpublished memoirs is used. If anyone attempts to influence a story's use or



interpretation, the researcher may have to omit the material rather than write a slanted history, face the family's dissatisfaction or risk a lawsuit.

Only through responsible use of evidence and precise expression and discretion in writing will you achieve a carefully reasoned, accurate account of the past.

Kinds of historical information in memoirs

Once you locate memoirs, what kinds of information can you expect to find?

Memoirs are often the only sources of information about certain periods and events. In the past, men and women took their families into new areas before the advent of census takers, the newspapers and the courts. Thus, for the earliest years of settlement, the records of a frontier come only from personal memories of the first pioneers. If you combine the separate reminiscences of several people, you can get a surprisingly complete picture of an area. Such memories may appear as short informal articles in local publications or in the newsletters of historical and genealogical societies.

Similarly, memoirs may provide the only sources of information for an area's earliest institutions. The first institutions in Dallas County, for example, were schools taught by pioneer women in their homes. Later, schools were held in log buildings which also served as churches. Information about those early schools and churches exists only in the memoirs of the Dallas residents who attended them.

Memoirs also preserve eyewitness accounts of how people lived in the past, and sometimes they provide unexpected information about

pioneer life. The earliest houses in new areas were simple and crude, but pioneers managed to furnish them with a few nice things from their previous homes.

When Alice Floyd thought of her parents' log cabin of the late 1840s in the Dallas suburb of Farmers Branch, she remembered chairs with rawhide bottoms with the hair left on the hide. She also recalled a big cherry chest and a small table used only for the Bible. One wall of the cabin had a floor-to-ceiling bookcase. The four-poster bedsteads had featherbeds on top of straw ticks, all covered with a counterpane and matching bolster with pillows. These high beds had trundle beds underneath, she remembered. Her "Memories" were published in the *Local History and Genealogical Society of Dallas* (Vol. 1, No. 6) in 1965. The traditional view of the frontier omits the fact that instead of being indigent, many pioneers were well established in their former homes. Frequently, pioneers managed to take a few comforts with them into the raw country, as Alice Floyd's memoirs related.

In addition to being a source for the earliest years of settlement, some memoirs provide the only information available about an area's first residents—especially those who left no descendants, who were not involved in political or military affairs, or who were not wealthy or socially prominent. Thus, memoirs are invaluable for studying the work and contributions of women and minorities to a community.

Perhaps the most important contribution of memoirs is their descriptions of everyday life. Skills that now seem so impressive, or even ingenious, were taken for granted and hardly noticed in the past—partly because everyone had the same abilities. These skills become significant only in retrospect, when older men and women realized that they were no longer practiced and might be forgotten. The routine, repetitive activities of the past define some basic differences between those times and ours. Beside them, the great events of history seem abstract and remote. Even wars had little immediate effect on the routines of daily life (except for the areas actually invaded).

The details of everyday life have another significance for frontier history as well. While they often illustrate the similarities of one American frontier with another, sometimes they show the uniqueness of a particular area. The pioneers used the resources at hand to make their homes in the wilderness, and frequently adapted skills to use materials at hand. For example, in New England women made candles from bayberries. And in Dallas

County, according to local historian Philip Lindsley in his book, *A History of Greater Dallas and Vicinity*, they used bear tallow for candles and honeybee wax for tapers.

Transcending physical aspects

Memoirs reflect the uniqueness of a specific place, but they also give accounts of a local area's inclusion in a nationwide movement. The Civil War, for example, affected all parts of the United States to one degree or another. You can study the effects of important national events through statistical studies which tell what the general population was doing, where people moved, what kinds of work they found and how their income levels changed. Statistics show what was typical or unusual for large numbers of people. But memoirs show what the most typical of conditions meant to those who experienced them. Only the observations of individuals convey what the war years meant to them and how they managed to put their lives back together after the peace.

The historical materials in memoirs go beyond the physical aspects of life into the more abstract realms of people's attitudes. When memoirs record family legends and stories, they frequently convey the ways people thought. Family anecdotes also preserve the values of the past. Amanda Carr's mother was born a slave, but emancipation did not mean less hard work or less personal discipline. Nellie Carr and her daughters ran their farm: "We cut wood; we hauled it," Carr remembered when columnist Kenneth Foree interviewed her for the *Dallas Morning News* in 1946. "We plowed, we planted, we picked, we hauled to gin. We fenced, we made chairs. . . ." Along with that hard work, Nellie Carr enforced a strict, old-fashioned discipline. Her daughter remembered that "when she sent you to the spring, she'd spit (on the ground), and you'd better be back before it dried." Foree's columns are in a collection at the Dallas Historical Society.

In addition to preserving people's attitudes and values, family memories provide a record of what people in the past considered funny. In 1946, Mrs. Charles D. Adams remembered her father's furlough from the Confederate Army in 1864 and related the tale to columnist Foree. Armed with a Bowie knife and a sword, a bearded, ragged soldier came one day to the house of her grandfather, Obadiah Knight, she told Foree. The soldier's appearance frightened the children and upset the family's pet dogs, but the man identified himself as a member of the Dallas-Tyler company—the same group the Knights' son Dude had joined in 1861. The

tattered stranger was welcomed as a friend and invited to stay the night. He spent several hours telling war stories to the Knight family before one of the teenaged daughters recognized Dude's "friend" as Dude himself—who could create a practical joke out of any situation. Foree published the anecdote in the June 30, 1946, edition of the *Dallas Morning News*.

Unlike tragedy or pathos, whose causes and pain we share with people of other times, humor tends to grow out of a specific cultural situation. Because humor is produced by mores, manners and customs that change, humor becomes quickly outmoded. But Dude Knight's practical joke is still funny, and it reaches across the century, linking us with an earlier America and giving us a sense of kinship with a previous era in our culture.

Problems with using memoirs as historical sources

Because memoirs relate personal and subjective memories, using them in historical research creates several problems.

First and most obvious is the problem of factual errors. All records prepared by human minds contain mistakes; and you must be specially careful when you deal with memory. The "first" church in a community, for example, may just be the earliest church remembered by the writer. Check such memoirs against the records of the area's several oldest churches to certify the dates when the congregation was first organized, as opposed to the date of the first church building. Although memoirs often relate an eyewitness account, they are not a record made at the time of the actual event. Even persons with sound memories may have learned the information incorrectly in the first place.

Whenever possible, compare factual information in memoirs with a newspaper account, the diary of another eyewitness or with contemporary letters. Comparing factual information raises problems. Diaries and letters may not exist, may not be available if they do exist and may not mention the particular subject needing verification. Moreover, if the event occurred before the establishment of the local newspaper or earlier than any existing issues of the newspaper, only other memoirs provide comparisons and verification of events and dates. The *Dallas Herald*, for example, was first published in 1849, but the earliest existing issues date from 1856. If positive verification of information in a memoir is impossible, alert your readers to the problem.

After the political and legal life of a community was established, plentiful records appeared. City directories, census reports, tax rolls, deeds, wills, court and police records, and newspaper advertisements verify specific facts mentioned in memoirs.

In addition, use sources from other areas of the United States to verify habits, customs and the processes of everyday routine work. For example, most of the pioneers settling in Dallas County came from the Southeast and from the Midwest, and they brought the methods of working they had used before. While it is true that the climate and the materials available in Texas required certain modifications, many pioneers kept and used the basic techniques.

You can also compare memories of daily life and work in other areas during the same period of time to verify habits. Such comparison is especially important when memories include descriptions of unusual processes. Catherine James, a pioneer of the Dallas suburb of Garland, for example, recalled the way her mother preserved butter from May, when the cows went dry, through the rest of the year. James' memories are published in *Seventy Years in the Garland, Dallas County, Texas Area* [Typescript, 1927], and are currently housed at the Nicholson Memorial Library in Garland, Texas. After whipping the moisture out of fresh butter, James wrote, her mother packed it into earthen jars in layers separated by salt. The jar was tightly covered and stored in the coolest place available. During the winter, the butter was unpacked as it was needed and the salt washed off. James remembered its "delightful nutty flavor," which she preferred to that of fresh butter.

The first question that comes to mind is: Could this process really preserve butter? While it is true that people developed many processes now lost because of mechanization, most people in the past relied on spring houses to preserve their milk products or, instead, made cheese. James may indeed be accurate, but unless her memory can be confirmed by comparisons with others, such an account must be used with caution.

Another problem with using memoirs as historical sources is their strong element of sentimentality. A memory of pure, clear air in Dallas County in the 1850s is undoubtedly accurate. But a claim that pork and ham of those years were superior to meats of the 1920s reveals more about the writer than about the quality of 19th-century foods. Taste and smell are often sharper in youth and reminiscing encourages nostalgia—especially about family, home and childhood. Feelings often distort

perceptions of the present and affect memory.

Finally, the factual information in memoirs is often slanted by the writer's particular point of view. Memoirs may be too selective, thereby giving an incorrect account of the past. One example of a biased memoir is *American Impressions*, translated by Marion Moore Coleman and published in Cheshire, Conn., by Cherry Hill Books in 1968. In the book, Kalikst Wolski, a Polish engineer, guided a group of French immigrants from Houston to Dallas County in 1855. He published his memoirs some 20 years later. From other sources we know that Dallas in 1855 consisted of a cluster of log buildings near the ford across the Trinity River. Though Dallas was little more than an agricultural village where most of the 400-odd inhabitants produced their own food and clothing, the area had a weekly newspaper, a lyceum and at least one cultured woman who taught music lessons on her rosewood piano.

Wolski's European eyes ignored these few amenities and focused on the community's colorful and quaint disorder. He wrote about the unusual American frontiersmen rather than about the kind of society the settlers were building. Wolski's memoirs relate an incomplete view of Dallas which, if read by itself, gives an inaccurate picture of early Dallas.

Examining memoirs for accuracy

By comparing individual memories with other memoirs, with public records and with statistical studies, the local historian can avoid their weaknesses.

Ask yourself the following questions when you examine a memoir. Who is the writer? What is his or her purpose? Does the writer intend to influence our view of the past or merely to tell us what it was like? What is this writer's point of view or frame of reference? Why and for whom were these memoirs written? How does their information compare with that of other memoirs and public records? How accurate and reliable are the memoirs, and how do you know?

The problems and value of subjective sources

Researchers often express uneasiness about the validity of personal sources because they are subjective in nature. But a memoir's value lies precisely in that subjectivity. A great deal of historical research, whether national or local, involves the search for accurate facts—the correct dates of events, the reasons for a town's name, the moves of a family, an unbiased account of political conflict, the names of



Courtesy of Mrs. John Winiford & Miss Anne Cochran

Nancy Jane Hughes Cochran

objective facts. Yet, if history includes only "objective facts," it lacks any sense of real lives—a quality that draws many people to study the past.

City directories, censuses or even newspaper articles often give only the barest sense of what life was like for people in the past. By 1876, the population of Dallas had grown to more than 7,000 persons as railroads turned the typical Southern market village into a frontier "boom town." According to attorney Philip Lindsley, in *A History of Greater Dallas and Vicinity* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1909), life in Dallas was still primitive in some ways.

"At this time, and for years later, not a single street in the city was paved. I have seen rails stuck up in [deep] holes on Elm Street, as a warning. . . . The soil was called 'black waxy. Someone said it stuck closer than a brother. In going to my . . . home in the 'Cedars,' in rainy weather, I . . . walked across the mud as best I could. . . . Now and then I had to stop, and, knife in hand, cut some of the mud from my shoes. . . . I have seen country wagons with not a spoke to be seen in the wheels, the entire wheel apparently of mud."

Though good photographs of Dallas in the later 1870s do exist, pictures of unpaved streets cannot match Lindsley's description of the sheer nuisance of the sticky black mud.

Although Lindsley's personal memories described the community's social, cultural and

sources and often failed to check the facts of the stories he repeated. Thus, the most valuable materials in Lindsley's *History* are the subjective, personal memories he records, both his own and those of "old-timers" who came to Dallas before 1875.

Memoirs, then, provide glimpses of individual experience, giving a sense of the personalities and the motivations of those who built the community.

Nancy Jane Hughes Cochran was one of the founders of Cochran Chapel Methodist Church and a leader in her community, which is now part of a residential area of northwest Dallas. The church published her relatives' memories, titled *Memories Live On and On*, in 1974.

Her grandsons and nephews remembered her as "equal to any occasion." She could "preach a funeral, survey land, draw up a deed, run a sizable farm and operate a cotton gin." In her later years, Cochran sometimes sided with her young grandchildren against their parents in family disagreements. But she was "strait-laced" with her own children, especially when it came to "Sunday observance." Her grandson told columnist Sam Acheson, "Father said that on weekends [Grandmother] sewed the boys into their underwear so they couldn't go swimming on Sunday." Acheson's column ran in the Dec. 16, 1968, issue of the *Dallas Morning News*.

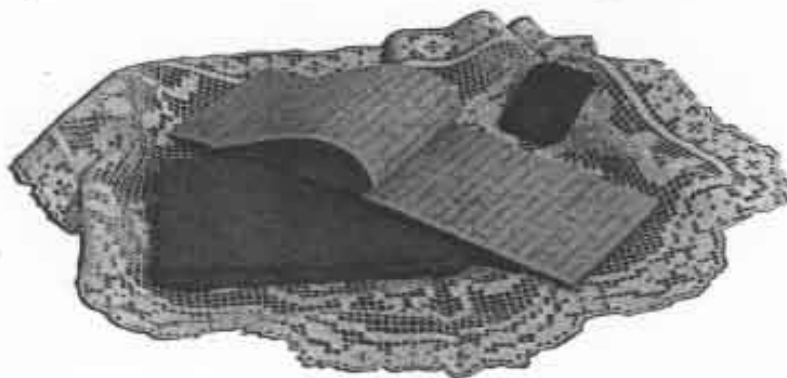
Cochran's strong personality impressed her values on her children's lives and, through them, on down to her grandchildren. Without

their memories we would have only an outline of her life without any insight into her character.

Few memories can be counted and tabulated as "trends" or "tendencies." Memories cannot be charted onto graphs or compiled into tables for each is unique, individual and specific to a place and time. Each is anecdotal and subjective, and each is quite real, reminding us that history is about people who lived and hurt, laughed and felt. One major value of memoirs in the writing of history, then, lies specifically in the realm of experience that we call "subjective."

Conclusion

For the general public, much of the fascination of history comes from good stories about real people. On the other hand, academic historians tend to be uncomfortable with individual experience because its anecdotal nature cannot be called typical. With the uses of personal memories, both academic historians and general readers are right. The memory of any person is a single case that may not serve as an accurate example of the experience of other people; yet the experience of the individual, in fact, matters *because it is unique*. If we remind ourselves of their limitations, personal memories—memoirs—will not distort our conclusions and observations. Instead, these glimpses of the past will enrich our knowledge and understanding of life in former times.



For further reading

In the field of history, one of the best uses of personal sources to reconstruct the lives of a large number of people is John Mack Faragher's *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979). In Appendix II (pp. 198–203), Faragher explains his use of a behavioral science method called "content analysis" to study both the daily lives and work, and the attitudes and values of the Oregon pioneers. Despite his statistical analysis of diaries, journals and

memoirs, Faragher preserves a sense of genuine insight into the lives and motivations of individuals.

Julie Roy Jeffrey uses personal sources in a more traditional way in *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979). Jeffrey uses quotes from the diaries and journals of pioneer women effectively and, though her examples are chosen without the kind of systematic analysis done by Faragher, they are carefully chosen.

T. F. Carney's article, "Content Analysis: A Review Essay," in the *Historical Methods Newsletter* (March, 1971), pp. 52-61, thoroughly explains the application of content analysis to historical materials. Despite its usefulness, it is an abstract and impersonal study. The same must be said for John A. Garraty's study, "The Application of Content Analysis to Biography and History," in *Trends in Content Analysis*, edited by Ithiel de Sola Pool (Urbana, Ill., 1959).

Behavioral scientists use content analysis to evaluate the personal experiences of groups of people, but they also use the "case study" approach. One good explanation of how psychologists use personal sources is by Gordon W. Allport, *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1942). Allport, in fact, lists the same kinds of questions that historians ask in evaluating the validity and accuracy of sources.

Another Social Science Research Council publication is *The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology, and Sociology* (Washington, D.C.: 1945). Authors Louis Gottschalk, Clyde Kluckhohn and Robert Angell discuss the uses of personal documents in their respective fields of study. Gottschalk's essay is a useful basic discussion of the historical method.

Regarding memoirs as works of literature, see Francis Russell Hart's two essays on the nature of modern memoirs and how they reflect our times. In "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography," in *New Literary History* (Spring, 1970), pp. 485-511, Hart offers some useful definitions of "Confessions," "Apology" and "Memoir" as literary forms. Of

the three kinds of personal memories, Hart observes that the memoir seeks specifically to relate the self to history, to cultural patterns and changes.

Another work by Hart, "History Talking to Itself: Public Personality in Recent Memoir," *New Literary History* (Autumn, 1979), pp. 193-210, analyzes the memoirs of several currently prominent persons and focuses on their need to relate as individuals to the larger society, essentially to their own time in history.

Lynd Ferguson's article, "Autobiography as History," in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* (Winter, 1979-80), pp. 139-155, concentrates on autobiography. Ferguson also includes a useful discussion of the accuracy and validity of memory as a source for information about the past and deals with the subjective as a realm of experience.

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She has published articles in education and local history, and recently edited *When Dallas Became a City: Letters of John Milton McCoy, 1870-1881*, the letters of the first city attorney of Dallas.

This leaflet grew out of "Remembering—and Writing," a series of workshops on the writing of memoirs sponsored by the Dallas Public Library and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The author extends special thanks to Katherine Jagoe and Susan Pacey for their criticism and advice.

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Using Oral History in Museums

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BY BARBARA ALLEN BOGART

History museums in the 1990s have a variety of important objectives and constituencies. They must make their programs responsive, relevant, and responsible to their communities in the present while fulfilling their traditional mission of collecting, preserving, and interpreting the past. Oral history can help museums achieve all these goals.

At first glance, incorporating oral history into their programs may seem daunting for history museums, especially for those with limited staff and scarce resources. But museums of all sizes and kinds have been using oral history in their programs for years. This *Technical Leaflet* offers some suggestions on how oral history can be successfully and effectively used in history museum settings and provides a few examples that illustrate how oral history can be a powerful tool in achieving the history museum's mission.

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history is the systematic collection and recording of personal memories as historical documentation. In a sense, an oral historian collects memories in the same way a museum collects artifacts.

The practice of oral history is very old, but in the United States it has been widely used among both academic historians and the general public since the 1970s. The major impetus for its popularity over the past twenty five years has been the renewed interest in local and community history that emerged around the time of the American Bicentennial.

In academic circles, historians have begun to pay more attention to the lives of people who traditionally have been absent from standard historical works, including ethnic and racial minorities, workers, women, and children. For these subjects, oral history provides valuable information that is not often available in more traditional sources.

Likewise, in history museums, the trend toward a more democratic social history has been emerging. For many museum professionals, oral history has become a natural tool for broadening their programs to include a wider spectrum of their communities. It bridges the gap between the past and the present by using personal memories to interpret artifacts or experiences.

Today, oral history is used in a wide range of institutions all over the country, from state historical societies to house museums and museums with very specialized missions. Each uses oral history in different ways to suit their missions, communities, and resources. Some use oral history only for special projects, while others have built it into virtually all their programs. Regardless of how oral history is used, the fact that so many institutions take advantage of it suggests that oral history is adaptable to and extremely useful in a broad range of museums. Perhaps the greatest advantage of oral history in a museum setting is that it can easily be built into what you already do.

What follows are descriptions of how oral history can be used in a history museum, including examples from a variety of institutions around the United States. Also presented is a brief overview of the process of undertaking an oral history project, and a section on common questions and concerns you may have about implementing oral history in your own institution.

USING ORAL HISTORY TO DOCUMENT COLLECTIONS

In a cupboard next to my kitchen is my grandmother's four-piece silver coffee service, which has a story associated with it. If I donated the coffee service to a museum, I would want the story to be made part of the accessions record because the story is what's important about the service for me and my family.

Oral history can become part of the acquisitions



Children of sheep ranches in Cowboy Country. Photo by Ray Rothman, Wyoming State Museum.

Growing Up in W

Oral histories enhance the interpretive value of photographs. Photo courtesy of the author.

process by interviewing donors about the items they are turning over to the museum. In fact, much informal interviewing does go on when curators and donors are working together, but it can be beneficial to make it a more formal process. During the interview, a donor can provide valuable information about the donated items, not just about their provenance, but about their meaning as well. Sometimes such information is essential to understand the items. Photographs, for instance, need to have as much identification as possible to be properly cataloged and effectively used in interpretation.

For instance, in 1993, the Wyoming State Museum was given five reels of 16mm color film, which the donor had shot during several rafting trips down the Green and Colorado rivers in the late 1950s, before several dams were built. We asked the donor to nar-

Childhood is a

universal experience. We all grow up in families of one kind or another. We work and play and go to school. We make friends and explore our world. All these experiences help shape our identity and our values as adults.

But *where* we grow up also has a powerful influence on us. We learn from the landscape that surrounds us just as we learn from the people around us.

So what does it mean to grow up in Wyoming? Here, Wyomingites tell us, in their own words, from their own memories, about their growing up years.

The words in this exhibit come from interviews with people of every Wyoming, of all ages, recorded in spring 1994. They are divided by state, childhood home, and sex of birth. A later volume titled, *The Photographs in this exhibit are drawn from the Thomas Photograph Collection of the Wyoming State Museum.*

Wyoming

rate a travelogue on audio cassette tape while we showed the films. He explained how and why the trips were taken; identified the locations, many of which are now underwater; described the people involved; and told stories about adventures along the way. Without the audio component, a silent film is simply a cryptic visual record of unidentified terrain and unknown people.

Using recording equipment to capture these memories has several advantages. Not only is it easier for donors to tape record what they know than to write it all out by hand, but you will probably ask for, and receive, more information than the donor would ordinarily write about on the acquisition form. When the tape-recorded information becomes part of accessions record, it can save valuable research time down the line if the artifacts or materials are used in interpre-

tive exhibits or other museum programs.

Another benefit of involving donors with oral history is that it helps promote positive donor relations. Most people are flattered to be interviewed and are happy to provide you with information about the artifacts they are giving you. The process of capturing their memories on tape also enhances donor's perceptions that you appreciate their donation.

REACHING OUT TO VISITORS

Museum visitors often have strong personal associations with the events, experiences, and artifacts on exhibit. Frequently they, like donors, can provide information about how particular items were made or used, can identify people and places in historical photographs, and can tell anecdotes or relate personal memories about episodes, individuals, or locales related to the subjects depicted in exhibits.

There are several ways to take advantage of this natural response. For instance, some museums place response sheets at strategic locations in an exhibit, asking people if they have information or memories about the exhibit's topic and if they would be willing to be interviewed. Museum staff members then contact individuals who complete the response sheets and arrange for the interviews.

The curator for an exhibit at the University of Nevada who dealt with changes in the urban landscape of Reno over the past twenty five years built such response mechanisms into the exhibit design itself. At the end of the exhibit, visitors were invited into a curtained-off space where there was a tape recorder and directions on how to record their own memories of particular buildings or locales before development changed them. The curator, who was gathering such memories as part of a larger research project, was overwhelmed at the response. "Everyone had a story tell," he said. "Even if it wasn't about Reno, people seemed eager to talk about the places in their lives that had changed."

Using oral history to allow visitors to make a personal contribution to an exhibit is an effective means of getting the community involved and invested in the work of the institution. This is the premise underlying an oral history project at the Texas Maritime Museum in Rockport, Texas. In a self-guided oral history program, visitors to the museum are given an opportunity to record their own maritime experiences or family traditions about the subject. In the museum's library, visitors are encouraged to record as much information as they wish, and they are able to take home a copy of the tape when they have finished. Museum volunteers prepare subject guides to the original tapes which become part of the museum's library. This visitor participation approach allows the museum to gather information fairly effortlessly, and according to its director, helps create a sense of community for the museum.

USING ORAL HISTORY IN INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITS

Probably the most extensive use of oral history in most history museums is to support interpretive programs, especially exhibits. During exhibit development, for example, oral history can be used as a research resource. Many state historical societies, universities, and public libraries, have extensive oral history collections that can be mined for information about a potential exhibit topic.

Because oral history allows people to express what's important to them, it also can be used effectively in developing exhibit themes. Exhibit themes that are drawn from oral history can be an especially powerful way to reach visitors because they may have a deeper connection that enables them to identify with the experiences presented in the exhibit. For instance, when the Belmar Village Historical

Because oral history allows people to express what's important to them, it also can be used effectively in developing exhibit themes.

Museum in Lakewood, Colorado received an important donation of Vietnam War artifacts and photographs, it planned an exhibit around them. As exhibit plans developed, the staff decided to conduct oral history interviews with local Vietnam veterans. Ultimately, the labels for all the photographs in the exhibit were drawn from oral histories.

A museum can also conduct an oral history project to gather information around which an exhibit can be designed. For instance, the Fossil Country Museum in Kemmerer, Wyoming, conducted a series of interviews on coal mining from which it developed an exhibit incorporating its extensive collection of artifacts and photographs. At the University of Wyoming's American Studies program, the themes that emerged in a series of oral history interviews with European immigrants and their children in southwestern Wyoming were used as the basis for a traveling

WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE WINTER?

We have all these really steep cedar hills around here. My grandpa cleared the trees off this one hill and in the winter we take our tubes down it, get it packed down so hard it's like ice. — *Casey Pitzer, Rock Springs & McAlister (1882)*



One time, there was so much snow that we built a kind of fort out front of the house. That's how much snow we had. — *Mark Anderson, Rock Springs (1877)*

All the family would go up to the mountains in the summer. Well, all I did personally was mostly fish. Mostly fish, hunt, trap. And, just like any other youngsters, play. — *Charles Martin, Buffalo (1924)*



One memory I especially treasure was a Christmas there was so much snow when we hiked up to get a Christmas tree off the face of the mountain. It was cold, too, about 10 below zero. When we got up there, a huge herd of elk came along and jumped the fence in front of us. I can remember just standing and watching those magnificent animals run by. — *Carroll Towner, Buffalo (1882)*

... AND IN THE SUMMER?



We would get together with the neighbors for a picnic on Sundays after Sunday school. We would fix a picnic lunch and get into the wagon and drive 6 or 8 miles to the Happy Hollow School House. Then after Sunday school, we would get all of our picnic supplies together and enjoy the rest of the day sitting and eating. — *Edna M. Dugan (1915)*

We used to skate in the wintertime on Flat Creek up into the Elk Refuge where it would freeze in the winter. When it first froze up, before the snow drifted and covered it, it was open and you could skate up into the Refuge quite a long way. — *Ted Benson, Jackson (1911)*

I had a very good friend whose father was the cow bossman for the Elk Sheep Company. They had lots of kids up on the head of Flat Creek, so in the summertime, my, he and I would take our horses and go to the cow camp.

We stayed up there practically all summer and helped old Sam Kramer. Well, he didn't think we were much of a help because we were mostly fishing. — *Bill McHarris, Thompson (1898)*



We always had our own little private skating pond out back because the water ran down into a gully behind the house. So we had that for a good skating pond. That was during the days of the steam engine, so when the steam engine would come by, they would run steam over it and clean it off and smooth it out for us. — *Lena Gulliver, Bureau (1914)*

Oh, we swam in the river. It was the most wonderful thing in the world. You could go in there just the way God made you; you didn't have to wear a suit. It was beautiful, it was beautiful. — *Audrey Susan, Laramie (1901)*

Transcribed excerpts of oral history interviews can serve as visual elements for museum exhibitions. Photo from "Growing Up In Wyoming," courtesy of the author.

exhibit called "Ellis Island in Wyoming."

The Southern Oregon Historical Society made particularly innovative use of oral history in its project "The Land in Common," which involved a series of traveling exhibits dealing with and circulated to three communities in Jackson County. Each exhibit was based on interviews with a cross-section of residents, focusing on their perceptions of community identity and character and their assessments of historical change.

When used in developing interpretive exhibits, oral history not only provides first-hand information about the subject that may not be available in standard historical sources, it also infuses an exhibit with an immediate human presence, particularly when excerpts from oral histories are used as label text. This can be particularly beneficial when the topic of the exhibit is a broad one. In the Wyoming State Museum's series of exhibits on World War II, for instance, the interpretive labels included quotes from oral history interviews with Wyomingites to personalize and humanize such subjects as military service and commodity rationing.

Finally, when a museum undertakes a large, complex project, oral history can be used to serve a variety of purposes. For instance, in 1991, the Western Heritage Center in Billings, Montana launched an ambitious, three-year, multicomponent project called "Our Place in the West." At the heart of the project was a permanent exhibit on the Yellowstone River Valley with a focus on social history during the period from 1880 to 1940. Oral history was built into exhibit plans from the beginning. Audiotaped oral history interviews were conducted first, then videotapes were made of selected narrators. A thirty-minute video production focusing on ranching became part of the permanent exhibit. Excerpts from the oral history interviews were also used in the exhibit catalog, and other publications developed as part of the overall project.

ORAL HISTORY AS PART OF A MUSEUM'S OVERALL PROGRAM

Some museums have made oral history an integral part of their overall program and use it to support many of their activities. Rather than begin with a specific idea for an exhibit or a program to which oral history might contribute, these institutions assume that oral history can and should be an essential element in any museum program.

The Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka also believes oral history is essential to its programs. For instance, during a project to document quilt-making in Kansas, museum staff members interviewed contemporary quilt makers, then used extensive excerpts from the interviews in the project publication as well as for interpretive labels for a traveling exhibit.

According to the Kansas History Museum's education director, "Our commitment to oral history is a natural progression from the fact that our mission is to show people how history relates to their lives. If we are to do this effectively we must take our research up to the present and, of course, oral history is an excellent tool for that."

USING ORAL HISTORY FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES

Some museums have effectively used oral history to achieve particular ends. For instance, the oral history program at the First Division Museum in Wheaton, Illinois, was initiated to record reminiscences for research purposes. But, according to the museum's director of operations, "As the design of the galleries came to emphasize interactivity and the experiences of individual soldiers, it was decided to have a series of interviews professionally filmed." These interviews were later edited and incorporated into the audio-visual components of the galleries. Now there are touch screens that allow visitors to choose a question that is in turn "answered" by veterans in clips from interviews. The success of the videos in the galleries prompted a decision to videotape all future oral history interviews. To accomplish this, the museum has purchased a high quality video camera and is gradually acquiring other video production equipment to produce videotapes in-house.

As the First Division's experience suggests, museums can also use oral history for internal restructuring as well as public programs. For instance, as part of a general reorganization, the Kemerer Decorative Arts Museum in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, undertook a series of oral history interviews about Annie Grim Kemerer, who had endowed the museum and whose personal collection formed its core. The information gathered in those interviews enabled the museum to establish one gallery as a "Founder's Room." Furthermore, the museum revised its interpretive and docent program to present a more accurate picture of Annie Grim Kemerer as a collector.

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DEVELOPING COMMUNITY RELATIONS THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

Museums can use oral history to build strong relationships with both individual constituents and other agencies and organizations in their communities. One way to do so is through cooperative projects with other institutions or entities, pooling resources and staff/volunteer time to accomplish the work. For instance, the Wyoming State Historical Society (a private membership organization) teamed up with the Wyoming State Museum for an oral history project called "Growing Up In Wyoming." Volunteers from local historical society chapters attended a teleconferenced oral history workshop conducted by a museum staff member and completed more than 100 interviews with people of all ages from around the state. Museum staff transcribed the tapes and produced a traveling exhibit based on interviews and historical photographs from the museum's collection. The exhibit circulates statewide to libraries, museums, and schools; these institutions are encouraged to mount corollary exhibits of their own.

Oral history can help involve the community in the initial stages of a museum's development. For instance, in conjunction with the county library, the organizing committee for the Pikes Peak Museum in Colorado has plans to conduct a series of oral history interviews with local residents of to develop collecting themes for the museum as well as to foster community support for the museum's establishment.

Oral history can extend museum programs and services to groups of people that traditionally have been excluded from them. For example, the Carbon County Historical Society in Wyoming is gathering materials relating to the county's sheep raising heritage. Their plans include an oral history project with Hispanic families whose association with the sheep industry—primarily as shepherders—has been overlooked in the past. Staff members at the Kansas History Museum agree that oral history is a way to show a commitment to the non-white communities in the state. For some communities which maintain history as part of the oral tradition, a large part of their history would be missing without oral history projects.

For groups whose material culture has not been represented by museums' collections, using oral history to record their cultural traditions helps broaden an overall understanding of a community's past. In the city museum in Eureka, Nevada, for instance, oral history excerpts from interviews with southern and eastern

European immigrants who worked in the area's coal mines help enrich an exhibit on the mining industry.

Perhaps oral history's greatest benefit is that individuals and families whose memories become part of the museum's collection may become first-time visitors to and boosters for the institution. Just as museum artifact donors feel that they have a vested interest in the institution, so do individuals who have given a part of themselves through an oral history project.

ON DOING ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is most effectively and efficiently used in a museum setting when it is part of a specific project or regular museum program. For the best results, you should first decide how an oral history project can be coordinated with the programs already in place, how it can contribute to programs you are planning, and how it fits in with the institution's overall

mission and philosophy. Also keep in mind that a good deal of oral history material may already exist in your community. Before undertaking your own project, make sure you aren't reinventing the wheel; survey the collections in public libraries, state historical agencies, and university libraries and research centers.

The single greatest drawback to oral history is that it is labor intensive. It involves not only the time needed to contact narrators and conduct

interviews, but also time to process the interviews properly. Ideally, tapes should be fully transcribed; at the minimum, they should be indexed. This takes a considerable amount of time—estimates for processing time range from six to twelve hours for each hour of recording. Professional oral history standards call for tapes to be duplicated and the master tapes

to be housed archivally. On the other hand, oral history does not need to be terribly expensive to be done well. And while it does require investment in a good quality recorder, microphones, and recording tape, much of the actual work can be done by trained volunteers.

A committee should oversee the design of the project to ensure that it not only meets the museum's specific purpose but is also broad enough to use as a future research resource. The committee should create an interview guide or questionnaire for all interviewers to follow. Interviewers should attend a training workshop; information about such workshops is available from the Oral History Association (address given below). If the museum does not have storage facilities for the tapes, transcripts, and other materials

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This project was made possible through the generous support of the Wyoming State Historical Society and the Wyoming State Museum. The project was funded by the Wyoming State Historical Society and the Wyoming State Museum. The project was funded by the Wyoming State Historical Society and the Wyoming State Museum.

The Wyoming State Historical Society and the Wyoming State Museum teamed up for the oral history project "Growing Up in Wyoming." Volunteers attended training sessions in oral history and then conducted over 100 interviews with people of all ages and from across the state. Photo courtesy of the author.

resulting from the project, it should arrange for them to be deposited in an appropriate archive or library that has an oral history collection. The Oral History Association can help identify appropriate locations.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Here are some common concerns and helpful advice for local historical organizations that are interested in getting involved with an oral history project.

If we haven't done oral history before, where can we learn how to do it?

Contact the Oral History Association, your state historical agency, or a college or university about work-

The Oral History Association offers training workshops on oral history.

For information contact:

Oral History Association

Box 97234

Waco, TX 76798-7234

Phone: (817) 755-2764

Fax: (817) 755-1571

shops and consultants. The Oral History Association offers training workshops at its annual meetings every fall. Many state historical agencies have ongoing oral history programs with knowledgeable staff. Some university history departments offer courses in oral history.

How good does our oral history project need to be?

Oral history is a means of creating historical documents by preserving memories. Just as you strive to give the best possible care to the artifacts in your col-

lection, the oral history you collect should be as well researched and documented as it possibly can be—not only for the sake of your immediate program needs, but to serve future researchers and future

museum audiences as well. Even if your plans for immediate use of the oral history are just for background research or to provide material for labels, other individuals may have other uses for it.

At a minimum, effective oral history projects requires a certain amount of training for staff or volunteers. The process requires using a good quality tape recorder and archival quality tape. With an eye to the future, you might want to invest in a DAT or laser disc recorder if your institution can support that technology. If you plan to use audio excerpts as part of an installation or for a media production, then you should strive for the best possible sound quality. Again, staff members of a college or university media center may be able to offer sound technical advice on the best kinds of recording machines, microphones, and recording tape.

Should we audiotape or videotape?

The answer depends on what your plans are for the material. If your institution has good quality video equipment, then it could certainly be used in conjunction with high quality audio recording. Some museums conduct audiotaped interviews first, then select individuals they want to feature in a videotaped exhibit, program, or production. Other institutions use videotape exclusively, whether or not they intend to use the footage for exhibit or broadcast. Remember, an interviewer cannot effectively conduct an interview and run a video camera at the same time. Hence, videotaping automatically doubles the amount of staff/volunteer time. And high quality videotaping requires a certain amount of training and skill.

How do we handle oral history tapes and transcripts?

Just as you require a donation form to be signed by donors, standard oral history practice calls for narrators and interviewers to sign a copyright release form. Sample forms can be obtained from the Oral History Association. The American Library Association and the Society of American Archivists have published standards for cataloging, arranging, describing, and preserving oral history collections.

To be most useful, oral history tapes should be fully transcribed. The most effective method involves using a transcriber machine and a word processor. You may want to enlist volunteers for this time-consuming and occasionally tedious job. At a minimum, oral history interviews must be indexed, that is, a list prepared of the topics on the tape, in the order in which they were discussed. Both audiotapes and videotapes should be stored in climate-controlled environments, and tran-

scripts and indexes should be printed on archival quality paper.

What if we have no money for equipment and no staff time to spare?

Publicize the project as widely as possible and ask for assistance. Enlist help from your volunteer corps or from organizations such as senior citizens centers, women's clubs, local historical or genealogical societies, or civic clubs. Ask for donations or loans of equipment and supplies from local businesses that use recording or transcribing equipment (such as law firms).

Oral history may be daunting, but projects can be scaled to match your institution's mission and resources. And the rewards can be far beyond your expectations. Ask your colleagues in other museums about their oral history efforts and be prepared for an enthusiastic recital of success stories.

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A Guide to Oral History Interviews

BY BARBARA W. SOMMER AND MARY KAY QUINLAN

The purpose of this Technical Leaflet is to give you information about what oral history is, how to do it, and how to use it. Oral history is a process developed for collecting first-hand historical information. Its unique niche is that it allows you to capture both the words and the voices of the people who have this information.

INTRODUCTION

The uses of oral history are limited only by your imagination. As with all technical processes, however, a successful oral history interview requires a good understanding of the right techniques. This is true for any potential user, whether it be a museum, teachers in the schools, students interested in National History Day, a public library, or a family interested in documenting its own past. This Technical Leaflet is designed to help in that process. Information on additional sources and on places to turn with more questions is given and in the bibliography.

What is oral history? Each oral history interview is a primary resource document, just as is a diary, a set of old letters, a family Bible, or a series of government documents. It is created in an interview setting with a witness to or a participant in a historical event for the purpose of collecting and preserving the person's first-hand information and making it available to researchers.

The use of oral sources to obtain historical information is not new. Prior to the use of written histories, many people relied on oral traditions to transmit knowledge of the past to future generations. Although oral traditions do not meet the definition of oral history as first-hand knowledge, many folklorists and other scholars are now using oral history interviewing techniques to document this information.

Oral history has sometimes been confused with the reading of diaries, letters, and other primary resource documents onto an audio or video tape by actors and others who are not the authors of the documents. Although this enlivens the use of these materials, it is not oral history. Nor is the recording of speeches or other community events.

Tape recorded reminiscences are also often confused with oral history. Without the reliance on a structured interview, the thorough research necessary to prepare for an interview, the depth and detail of information collected, the strict processing techniques, and availability to researchers, reminiscences cannot be classified as oral history.

Oral history can help document much previously undocumented information. A community, a business, an event, or the life of an individual—all can benefit from this process. A **life interview** uses oral history in multiple interview sessions with one person to obtain an autobiographical set of materials. A **project** is an event-focused process. It is a series of oral history interviews with a variety of individuals about a specific historical event or topic of interest. The development of a number of interviews on one subject designed to complement one another provides a depth and breadth of information not often found in other primary resource materials.

Oral history projects are often used to document the history of a community. The broader applications of interviews done for family or genealogical purposes are, however, sometimes overlooked. These interviews often contain valuable information about community history. For this reason, even if the immediate interest is documenting the life of a family member, the procedures outlined here can make it possible for others to benefit from this information.

Who participates in an oral history interview? An oral history interview usually has two participants, the **interviewer** and the **interviewee**.

The **interviewer** is responsible for developing and carrying out the interview. The depth of preparation done by the interviewer is key to the success of the interview. The interviewer must also be able to understand and build effective human relationships in the interview setting.

The **interviewee, also called the narrator**, is chosen for his or her first-hand knowledge about a certain subject and for the ability to communicate this knowledge effectively.

As with all professional activities, certain ethical standards are important to the practice of oral history. The Oral History Association (OHA), the national professional organization for oral history practitioners, supports and encourages an understanding of the ethical principles and standards that guide oral historians as they conduct their work. These standards are described fully in the Oral History Association publications **Guidelines and Principles of the Oral History Association** (1992) and **Oral History and the Law** (1985,1993). They define the responsibilities to the interviewees in an oral history interview and to the public, and they outline the responsibilities of institutions that sponsor and maintain collections of oral history materials.

The OHA standards are based on a frame of reference that treats the content of an oral history interview as an original, creative work subject to copyright law. The OHA guidelines are, thus, designed to assure respect for those legal rights as well as ethical considerations in the course of collecting, archiving, and using oral history materials.

A brief summary of these principles and standards are:

- Interviewees must be fully informed about the purposes of the project and the expected disposition and dissemination of the materials. Consideration must be given to ethical issues associated with using the interviews to develop commercial products and putting the oral history materials on the Internet.
- Interviewees must be asked to sign a legal release form giving the project sponsor their copyright and, thus, their permission to use the materials. This should include any

restrictions the interviewee may wish to place on the use of the materials. Federal copyright law is very clear on this issue. An oral history interview becomes a copyrightable document as soon as the interview has been completed. Further information on this topic is found in the Oral History Association pamphlets, **Guidelines and Principles of the Oral History Association** and **Oral History and the Law**.

- The interviewers should be well trained. They should have completed thorough background research so they can conduct an informed interview that goes beyond superficial treatment of the topic, resulting in the collection of new information of lasting value.
- The interviewers should provide complete background documentation for the preparation, methods, and circumstances of the interview.
- Rewards and recognition that might result from an oral history project should be shared with the interviewees.
- The owner of the final product, whether it be an institution or a person, should maintain the highest professional and ethical standards in the preservation and use of the oral history interviews.

ORAL HISTORY TECHNIQUES

Developing an oral history project takes a great deal of planning, preparation, and research along with a careful and thoughtful choice of interviewees. Success or failure can often be traced to the thoroughness with which the work was planned. Sometimes you may discover that what had seemed like a simple little project to interview a handful of people or a straightforward life interview masks a much more exciting project somewhat broader in scope that could lead to an array of public presentations or the uncovering of a wealth of fascinating new information not originally anticipated.

Here, in question format, are the basic steps you should take to organize and plan an oral history project.

- Have you written a focused mission statement or statement of objectives?
- Have you selected an advisory board to help guide the project?
- Have you outlined a timeframe for completion of the project?
- Have you developed a bibliography of existing materials on your topic?
- Have you developed a list of themes or topics to pursue as a place to begin your research?
- Have you developed a project budget, including identification of possible funding sources?
- Have you identified the equipment to be used for the interviews and transcriptions?
- Have you considered legal issues, including who will own

the copyright to the interviews?

- Have you developed a donor form, also called release form, that clearly provides for the transfer of copyright to the designated owner?
- Have you considered putting information on the Internet and, if so, have you made sure your interviewers are trained to discuss this with interviewees and that your donor form contains clear and careful language reflecting this possibility?
- Have you established record-keeping procedures to track interview status, transcription, and processing?
- Have you arranged for permanent storage and access for the interview collection?
- Have you arranged for the training of all volunteers or paid staff who will be involved in the project?
- Have you planned publicity for the project, including outreach efforts to encourage its use?

Some of these steps may be accomplished more quickly than others. Following the steps will, however, help you develop a strong, successful oral history project.

EQUIPMENT

Traditionally, oral history has relied on the use of audio equipment in recording an interview. This has expanded to include questions about the use and viability of digital recorders and other examples of new audio technology. There are many options to think about when considering audio equipment. New equipment comes onto the market regularly. Critical questions to ask regarding decisions about audio equipment include the expected life of the equipment, the impact of changing technology on the sound products of the interview, and continued access to the audio recording. Archivists at most major museums, state historical societies, and other historical organizations are excellent sources of the most up-to-date information about the viability of different kinds of audio-recording equipment, the impact of rapid technological changes on the equipment, and the expected long-term ability to retrieve the sound.

Clear thinking about your oral history project or life interview and long-term needs for retrieving and using the recorded voices will help you determine which audio recording equipment is best for you. At all times, however, the use of broadcast-quality recording equipment and external microphones is important to maximize the potential uses of the information collected.

With the increased availability of video equipment, questions are raised regularly about its use in the oral history interview setting. With appropriate planning and a clear understanding of the situations that can benefit from the production of video materials, both audio and video can be effectively used. Video can be

used either in the initial interview or as a follow-up to complement or supplement information given in an audio format.

The most important factor to remember is the need to use broadcast-quality audio and/or video equipment with an external microphone and high-voice-quality video and audio sound cassettes. This assures the material you produce will have maximum flexibility for potential future public use in museum exhibits, CD-ROM's, radio and television programming, and the like. Even if you only intend to use written transcripts of your interviews, the use of broadcast-quality equipment does not limit the options of future users because of poor quality recordings.

Mini-audio cassette recorders and tape recorders developed for home use should not be used for oral history. They cannot produce adequate sound quality. The use of hand-held video equipment is also never recommended. Videocassettes for this equipment do not meet permanent archival standards.

Persons interested in learning more about the specifications for broadcast-quality audio and video equipment should turn to a state educational television network, local television stations, the state historical society, or the Oral History Association for up-to-date information.

INTERVIEWS

As with any other aspect of a successful oral history project, preparation is the key to success in conducting the interviews. Here, in question format, is an outline of the steps to take in planning, conducting, and completing the work on an oral history interview.

Before the interview

- Have you designated a **project administrator** to keep track of all contacts made with each interviewee?
- Have you developed the forms you will need. These include: **Donor Form**, **Oral History Interview Form**, and **Interviewee Biographical Form**.

The **donor form** transfers copyright and ownership of the interview to the designated owner. It is signed by both the interviewer and the interviewee as soon as the interview session ends even if more sessions are planned with the interviewee.

The **oral history interview form** contains information about the interviewer and the interviewee, the place and date of the interview, the date the donor form was signed, the number of cassettes used, and an abstract of the interview. It provides some immediate archival control over the interview and is filled out by the interviewer as soon as possible after the interview.

The **interviewee biographical form** contains basic

biographical information about the interviewee. It is filled out by the interviewee before the interview.

- Have you selected the interviewee(s) and made the initial contact, preferably through a letter that tells about the project and its purpose and identified the interviewer? Have you then made follow-up telephone calls to the potential interviewees to answer any questions about the project and to determine whether each will be participating in it?
 - Have you thoroughly researched the topics to be discussed in the interview? Beginning with the general overview research, have you now completed the interview-specific research necessary for each interviewee?
 - Have you organized the information to be covered in the interview so it will flow in an organized manner from one topic to another while allowing for the inclusion of information that may be unexpected and yet relevant to the interview topics?
 - Have you avoided the temptation to write out every question you think you may want to ask, staying instead with an outline of topics as a guide for the interview?
 - Have you learned as much as possible about the interviewee?
 - Have you arranged the logistics of the interview, including scheduling, equipment, and site considerations to maximize interview quality? Have you communicated all scheduling information with the interviewee?
 - Have you reviewed with the interviewee, in very general terms, the expected content of the interview to allow him or her to prepare for the interview?
- Please note:** It is not recommended that the interview outline be shared with the interviewee. This will result in rehearsed or "canned" answers rather than spontaneous responses. A conversation or a letter outlining, in very general terms, the subjects to be covered in the interview will, however, help the interviewee focus on the task at hand.
- Have you explained to the interviewee that a donor form has been developed and that both interviewer and interviewee will sign it at the end of each interview session?
 - Have you become thoroughly familiar with your equipment? If you are using video, do you have trained assistants to help you as needed? Do you have enough cassettes? Do you have an extension cord, pencil, and paper to take notes, and any other items you might need during the interview?

During the interview

- Have you kept in mind the ethics of the interview situation?
- Have you showed the interviewee the donor form, explained its use, and answered any questions about it?
- Have you checked your equipment to make sure it is working properly? Have you answered all questions

about its use?

- Have you made sure there are no unusual background noises in the interview setting that could mar the sound quality of the final product? Remember, your recorder will pick up all background noises you instinctively tune out. If using video, have you chosen an appropriate visual and audio setting?
- Have you made sure there is an appropriate introduction on the cassette fully identifying the interviewee, the interviewer, and the date and place of the interview?
- Have you used open-ended questioning techniques?
- Have you remembered to ask only one question at a time? If you need to define a question in any way, have you remembered not to elaborate on it or to lead the interviewee to the type of answer you “expect?”
- Have you remembered to remain neutral and not to offer your own opinions on the subject of the interview?
- Have you remembered to not interrupt the interviewee? The goal in an oral history interview is to collect long paragraphs of answers from well focused, clearly stated, open-ended, neutral questions.
- Have you remembered to not use internal abbreviations or jargon unknown to the general public? If the interviewee uses jargon, have you asked for explanations or translations of it?
- Have you listened carefully to the interviewee at all times so that you can ask appropriate follow-up questions?
- Have you remembered you are there to listen to the interviewee and not to talk yourself?
- Have you kept a running list of proper names mentioned in the interview? (This should be reviewed by the interviewee at the end of the interview for correct spelling. This list should be kept in the interviewee’s master file. A copy should be given to the transcriber.)
- Have you kept an eye on the time to make sure you have not extended the interview past an appropriate time limit? (Interviews usually last from one to one-and-one-half hours. Only rarely should they go more than three hours. If more time is needed, another interview session should be scheduled.)
- Have you taken a black-and-white photograph of the interviewee in the interview setting for the master file?
- After the interview is over, have you asked the interviewee to sign the donor form, even if future sessions with this person are planned?

After the interview

- Have you immediately labeled all cassettes?
- Have you popped the tabs on the top of each cassette so it cannot be recorded over by accident?
- Have you made a working copy, i.e. a duplicate, of all interview cassettes and have you stored the originals in a safe place?
- Have you reviewed the content of the interview to identify questions for subsequent interviews, if needed?

- Have you filled out the oral history interview form, including writing a brief abstract of the interview, and added it to the interviewee’s master file?
- Have you written a thank you letter to the interviewee?
- Have you developed a transcript or a tape index to the interview? If you are transcribing, have you transcribed as accurately as possible, leaving out such things as false starts to sentences and hesitant sounds (um, ah)?
- Have you audit checked the interview transcript to make sure it is an accurate representation of the audiotape?
- Have you sent to the interviewee either the full transcript or a list of proper names and clarification questions for review of spelling and other details that will help insure the most accurate record possible of the interview be obtained?

Please note: Care should be taken with this step in the interview process to help the interviewee understand that full-scale editing of the transcript will alter the credibility of this primary resource document. The goal is to have a complete and accurate transcript that matches the interview as closely as possible.

- After the transcript has been corrected and finalized, have you given all materials related to the interview to the repository chosen for the project? Many oral history projects give a copy of the cassettes and the transcript of the interview to each interviewee. This is always well received. Some also have a party for all participants at the end of the project, including staff, volunteers, interviewers, interviewees, and anyone else associated with the work. A project that is well planned and carried out is indeed something to celebrate because you have created an invaluable gift for future generations. **Please note:** Oral historians rely on open-ended, evocative questions to elicit the most information. Examples: “What were you told?” “How did you celebrate Christmas?” “Tell me about your high school education?” “Describe your first home.” Leading questions should be avoided. Example: “Why don’t you like living here?” will not result in as complete an answer as the more neutral question: “Tell me about living here.” Questions beginning with “how,” “what,” “when,” “why,” “where,” and “who” are often used both to introduce a subject and to follow-up an initial statement. They help provide clarification to the answer and, when used in a follow-up question, elicit further information about the subject being discussed.

REPOSITORIES AND RECORD-KEEPING SYSTEMS

Record keeping, although largely unseen, is an important part of the oral history process. It provides the continuity and support necessary for both the interviewer and interviewee.

If possible, one person should act as **project adminis-**

trator. This person is responsible for keeping all information and materials generated by the interviews in order. The project administrator develops and keeps an up-to-date list of all potential interviewees with full names, home addresses, telephone numbers, and other contact information. A master project log listing all contacts with interviewees and the status of each interview is kept current.

A non-circulating **master file** should be kept for each interviewee. This should contain the following materials:

- The interviewee's full name, home and work addresses, telephone number, e-mail address, and fax number if available.
- Copies of all correspondence with the interviewee and notes of all telephone conversations.
- The signed donor form and the completed copies of the interviewee biographical form and the oral history interview form.
- The interview outline and all interviewer notes, including the list of proper names from the interview.
- Notes on any possible restrictions to the interview.
- Interviewee comments or statements made at any time during the interview or transcript review process.
- A draft of the transcript containing the notes the interviewee made while reviewing it.
- The master copy of the transcript photocopied on acid-free paper.
- The black-and-white photograph taken of the interviewee in the interview setting.

STORAGE RECOMMENDATIONS

The tapes generated by oral history interviews will last longer if kept under relatively constant temperature and humidity. It is best to avoid extreme heat and cold. Excessive moisture, dust, and atmospheric pollutants should also be avoided. To avoid bleed through of voices, the tapes should be played through completely at regular speed at least every two years. Check with archivists at your state historical society or other major institutions about long-term care of other sound and video products.

The master copy of the interview transcript, photocopied onto acid-free paper, should be kept in its own acid-free folder with the master file. The black-and-white photograph of the interviewee, taken in the interview setting if possible, also should be kept in its own acid-free folder with this material.

PROCESSING RECOMMENDATIONS

Full transcription of all tapes generated in an interview is the ideal method of processing an oral history interview. This will ensure continued access to the materials.

It takes about eight hours to fully transcribe one hour of audio. This produces a draft transcript, which is then audit checked for accuracy. After further review for accuracy of spelling and content, it is subject-indexed. The final product is photocopied onto acid-free paper, with user copies made from this master. This is the most stable and permanent interview product.

If a video component is part of the interview, the raw footage is kept intact as an archival document and a minute-by-minute log is made. Copies of the master footage are made for all uses. If no other audio exists, the audio portion of the footage is immediately dubbed onto an audio tape and the full transcription process is followed.

If limited finances preclude transcribing, the interview audio tapes should be tape-indexed. This is usually done with a stopwatch. The time elapsed on each side of the cassette is recorded as each new subject is introduced. This technique allows access to the contents of the interview, but falls far short of the complete access provided by a transcript.

In an attempt to ease the initial transcription work, some oral historians have experimented with computer-based voice recognition systems. Currently, these systems do not have the capability to accurately differentiate among the several voices on an audio tape. Contact the Oral History Association for the most up-to-date information on this subject.

Copies of completed transcripts or tape indexes can be bound and inserted into the collections of libraries or archives for patron use. This is a good method for making the material accessible to those interested in learning more about the subjects covered in the interview.

CONCLUSION

How is oral history used? In books, poetry, songs, magazines, radio, creative writing, exhibits, art projects, films, television shows, stage productions—the list is endless. Families use it to learn more about their individual pasts. Communities use it to help document a common past. Museums use the words in exhibit labels and provide special areas where visitors can listen to the voices or look at the videos. CD-ROMs are developed, with proper permissions, as sales items. Project materials, with proper permissions and planning, are put on the Internet. Oral history is a valuable tool for anyone interested in documenting first-hand information about the past. It allows each of us to ask, “What was it like for you?” and to learn from the answer.

Would you like help, support, or further information about oral history? Would you like to find out about

local or state associations in your area and the services they offer? If so, contact either the American Association for State and Local History or the Oral History Association. The Oral History Association can be contacted at:

Oral History Association

P.O. Box 1773

Carlisle, Pennsylvania 17013

tel: 717-245-1036

fax: 717-245-1046

e-mail: OHA@dickinson.edu

web site: <http://www.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha>

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SUGGESTED READINGS

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Oral History Association Pamphlets: *Oral History Evaluation Guidelines*. 2nd Edition, 1991.

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GLOSSARY TERMS

Donor form: The oral history donor form transfers copyright and ownership of an oral history interview to the designated owner. It is signed by both the interviewee and the interviewer, and any other person whose voice is heard on the cassette, as soon as the interview session ends even if more interviews are planned with the interviewee.

Interview index (time and/or recorder counter-based): An oral history interview index is usually done with a stopwatch, noting the time elapsed during the interview as each new subject is introduced. People have also used the counter on the tape recorder for this purpose, although this is not recommended because counters are not consistent among different recorders. An interview index is done only if limited finances preclude full transcription.

Interviewee (narrator): The oral history interviewee, also called the narrator, is chosen for an oral history interview on the basis of his or her first-hand knowledge about the subject or topic of the interview and for the ability to communicate this information effectively.

Interviewee biographical form: The oral history interviewee biographical form contains basic biographical information about the interviewee. It is filled out by the interviewee, with help from the interviewer as necessary, before the interview.

Interviewer: The oral history interviewer is responsible for conducting an oral history interview. This person must have both general and interview-specific research for the interview, must understand and be able to use open-ended questioning techniques, and must be able to build effective human relationships in the interview setting.

Life interview: A life interview is a series of oral history interview sessions with one person resulting in an autobiographical set of materials.

Master file: The oral history master file contains all information about the purpose of the interviews, the interviewee, the interviewer and the interview.

Oral history: Oral history is primary resource material. It is created in a recorded interview setting with a witness to or a participant in an historical event for the purpose of collecting and preserving the person's first-hand information and making it available to researchers.

Oral History Association: The Oral History Association is the national professional organization for practitioners of oral history. It supports and encourages an understanding of the ethical principles and standards that guide oral historians in their work.

Oral history information form: The oral history information form provides immediate archival control over the oral history interview. It contains information about the interviewer, interviewee, the place and date of the interview, confirmation of the signing of the donor form, the number of cassettes used in the interview, and a brief abstract of the interview. It is filled out by the interviewer as soon as possible after the end of the interview.

Oral history interview: An oral history interview is a primary resource document containing first-hand historical information not available from any other source.

It is recorded with one person and is a series of answers to well focused, clearly stated, open-ended, neutral questions. Interviews usually last about one and one-half hours. Only rarely should a single interview last more than three hours.

Oral history project: A project is a series of oral history interviews with a number of individuals, recorded one at a time, that focuses on one subject, topic or event.

Oral history recording equipment: The equipment used to record an oral history interview should be broadcast quality. An external microphone and high-voice-quality sound cassettes are extremely important. Mini-audio cassette recorders and tape recorders developed for home use are never recommended.

Primary resource: A primary resource document is one that provides first-hand information with no interpretation between the document and the researcher. Examples are a diary, a set of letters, a family Bible or government records.

Transcript: An oral history interview transcript is a verbatim printed copy of the interview. It matches the

interview as closely and completely as possible, leaving out only false starts and hesitation sounds, and contains the full and accurately spelled names of all persons and places mentioned in the interview.

Transcripts are often subject-indexed.

Videotaped or filmed oral history: With appropriate planning, videotape or film in an oral history interview can be used either in the initial interview setting or to supplement or complement information given in the initial interview. It is not recommended for the “talking head” interview. The use of hand-held home video equipment is never recommended.

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