

# **DOING ORAL HISTORY**

## **WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?**

Oral history is the process of eliciting and preserving a person's spoken recollections of events and experiences based on first-hand knowledge. Oral history provides a means of capturing the unique stories and experiences of individuals, families, and communities that are not recorded as paper documents and would otherwise be lost. Oral history can also enhance the paper trail of the past by providing voices for silent photographs and clarifying meaning in written documents. Oral history is an important tool for preserving the past, because only a small part of the past is ever documented, and only a small part of what is remembered is ever recorded.

An ORAL HISTORY is a recorded audio or video interview, in question-and-answer format. An ORAL HISTORY PROJECT is a series of oral history interviews focused on documenting a topic, theme, era, place, organization, event, or group of people. Individuals, teachers, librarians and archivists, as well as, amateur and professional historians have found oral history to be challenging, demanding, exciting and, extremely rewarding for both interviewers and interviewees.

## **PLANNING AN ORAL HISTORY**

Successful oral history requires thought and planning it involves far more than asking, "How about telling me about your life?" Crucial steps for the success of an oral history interview include:

- Defining the objectives of the interview.
- Determining who will be interviewed.
- Deciding who will conduct the interviews.
- Conducting pre-taping background research in order to develop a topic outline and to draft questions for likely all topics/subtopics.
- Selecting appropriate recording equipment and tape.

- Determining how post-taping tasks such as transcribing, indexing, duplicating tapes for security and preservation purposes will be completed.
- Oral history interviewers may decide to use videotaping equipment to collect and preserve visual as well as aural information.

## **DURING THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

- Work from an outline of major topics with prepared questions for topic. For example: family background; siblings; early schooling; neighborhood characteristics; community life; later education and vacation(s).
- Start with easily answered personal (and non-controversial) background questions.
- Ask short questions, making one query at a time.
- Avoid questions that result in "Yes" or "No" responses.
- Avoid prematurely interrupting interviewee responses.
- Probe! Always ask for hows and whys; ask for opinions and feelings.

## **AFTER THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

Obtain a signed, hand-dated legal agreement or deed of gift that establishes who owns the copyright and that the interview can be used by researchers. This agreement is mandatory if the interview is donated to a library or an archives.

Punch out the small tabs in cassette housing and label each cassette tape and outer wrapper with the interviewee's name; interview date; number of tape and side.

Finally, prepare the transcript and index (written text of words spoken during the interview) by listening to each tape and producing a word processed paper document for easy access to content.

## **EQUIPMENT FOR THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

- Use a recorder that plays standard size (2-1/2 X 4 inches) cassettes. Avoid microcassette

machines.

- Use brand name cassette tape, either C-60 or C-90. Type I tape is fine for voice recording.
- Use an *external* microphone instead of relying on the microphone built into the recorder.
- Use a recorder powered by electricity to eliminate worry about battery replacement.
- Always set up and test recording unit before conducting the interview.

## **PRESERVATION**

As with all types of fragile historical documents, audio (and video) recordings have long-term preservation needs. These include good environmental conditions such as low relative humidity (in the 40-50 % range); moderate, stable temperature (50-75 degrees, with daily cycling not to exceed 7 degrees Fahrenheit.), good air quality and low light levels.

- DALE TRELEVEN

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## **CONTACTS**

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Southwest Oral History Association, P.O. Box 36870, Albuquerque, N.M. 87176-6870. (Phone 505/277-7175)

Society of American Archivists, 600 South Federal, Suite 504, Chicago, IL 60605. (Phone 312/922-0140; e-mail info@saa.mhs.compuserve.com)

The UCLA Oral History Program is an excellent source for information on oral history resources; its web site includes an introduction to oral history, information on planning and conducting an oral history interview, and provides referrals to oral history organizations.

<http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/special/ohp/ohpindex.htm>

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