

Oral History Project

Definition

Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Oral history is not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor. Oral historians attempt to verify their findings, analyze them, and place them in an accurate historical context. Oral historians are also concerned with storage of their findings for use by later scholars.¹

Why Oral Histories?

We all have stories to tell, stories we have lived from the inside out. We give our experiences an order. We organize the memories of our lives into stories.

Oral history listens to these stories. Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Historians have recognized that the everyday memories of everyday people, not just the rich and famous, have historical importance. If we do not collect and preserve those memories, those stories, then one day they will disappear forever.¹

Steps to Follow for Your Project

- 1) Choose a family member or community member you want to interview for your oral history. **You will interview a family member or community member on a) their immigration experience, b) experiences or significant interactions with other cultures in the United States, or c) how the events and/or people of their childhood shaped their life.**
- 2) Gather as much information you can on related topics before the oral interview.
- 3) Create a list of questions to guide your oral interview. You do not have to strictly follow these questions during your interview. Please see attached suggestions.

What am I turning in?

- 1) A list of questions to guide your oral interview (15 questions).
- 2) Background notes to consider while interviewing your subject.
- 3) Notes taken from the interview.

Helpful Tips for Asking Questions

- Have a start-up list of questions to get your interviewee and yourself comfortable before you change to your topic list.
- Do plan the topic and form of your first substantial question after the "settling down" phase. Ask a question that will prompt a long answer and "get the subject going."
- Ask easy questions first. Ask very personal or emotionally demanding questions after a rapport has developed. End as you began, not with bombshells, but gently with lighter questions.
- Ask questions one at a time.
- Allow silence to work for you. Wait.
- Be a good listener, using body language such as looking at the interviewee, nodding, and smiling to encourage and give the message, "I am interested."
- If necessary, use verbal encouragement such as "This is wonderful information!" or "How interesting!" Be careful, however, not to pepper the interview with verbal encouragement such as "uh-huh," said at the same time that the interviewee is speaking.
- Ask for specific examples if the interviewee makes a general statement and you need to know more. Or you might say, "I don't understand. Could you explain that in more detail?"
- Ask for definitions and explanations of words that the interviewee uses and that have critical meaning for the interview. For example, ask a horseman what he means by the *shaft* of the buggy. How was it used? What was its purpose?
- Rephrase and re-ask an important question several times, if you must, to get the full amount of information the interviewee knows.
- Unless you want one-word answers, phrase your questions so that they can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Don't ask, "Were you a farmer on Denny Hill during the 1930s?" Ask instead, "What was it like farming up on Denny Hill during the 1930s?" Ask "essay" questions that prompt long answers whenever you can. Find out not only what the person did, but also what she thought and felt about what she did.
- Ask follow-up questions and then ask some more.
- Be flexible. Watch for and pick up on promising topics introduced by the interviewee, even if the topics are not on your interview guide sheet.¹

¹ Moyer, J. (1993, Revised 1999) Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History. Retrieved, 10.26.10 from http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html#WHATIS.