

# Oral History

## Hints for the Interviewer

Oral history is an effective, low-cost method of collecting and documenting family, church and organizational history. A minimum of supplies are required and most anyone can conduct a good interview. Oral history interviews may be audio or video recorded to add another element to the documentation. Typed transcripts should also be prepared from the recordings to protect the information from loss in the event of the digital file becoming lost or damaged. What follows is an introduction to the subject of oral history and a bibliography for further reading.

### Conducting the Interview

#### Important Hints

1. Be patient: Don't let periods of silence force you to jump in with another question. Give your narrator a chance to think about what he wants to say before you interrupt with the next question. Try to judge when the narrator has stopped thinking, then ask the next question.
2. Listen: Ask questions based on the answers, as well as questions based on the outline.
3. Make a list of names, places, and unfamiliar words to aid the typist. Jot down key words to remind you of questions you want to ask.
4. Be flexible. Some interviews will not allow strict adherence to the following hints.

#### Other Hints

1. The interview setting should be as quiet and free of distraction as possible. Ideally, the interview should take place in a room empty of anyone but the narrator and the interviewer. At the beginning of the recording, the interviewer should identify himself, the narrator, the date and place of the interview.
2. An interview is not a dialogue. The purpose of oral history interviews is to learn the narrator's story. Limit your own remarks to few pleasantries, followed by brief questions to start off the interview. Normally, begin the interview by asking for the birth date and place, followed by a question or two about the narrator's parents. This procedure relaxes the narrator and provides genealogical information.
3. Ask questions that require *more* than a "Yes" or "No" answer.
4. Ask one question at a time and keep questions as brief as possible.
5. Start with non-controversial questions. Delicate questions, if they must be asked, should be saved for later in the interview or even another session.
6. Relax and speak conversationally. Do not worry if your questions are not as neatly phrased as you might like.
7. Do not interrupt a good story because you have thought of a question, or because the narrator has temporarily strayed from the point.
8. If the narrator does stray from the point, politely pull him back to the subject at the first opportunity.
9. Encourage the narrator to be as specific in his responses as possible. Try to establish at each important point in the story the dates, locations, and participants involved in the action.

10. Do not challenge accounts you may think inaccurate. Instead, try to elicit as much information as you can.
11. Try to avoid off-the-record information.
12. Do not switch the recorder or video camera off and on. It calls attention to the recorder.
13. Limit the first interview to a reasonable time. One hour is good; an hour and a half to two hours is probably maximum.

## Bibliography

Many of these books were written in the tape recorder era, but the information they contain is still valid. Refer to the DePauw University Archives flier on Supplies for information on digital equipment.

Baum, Willa K. *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1971. (A classic in the field; excellent overall guide to collecting oral history.)

Brown, Cynthia Stokes. *Like it Was: a Complete Guide to Writing Oral History*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1988. (Describes how to write from oral history recordings.)

Charlton, Thomas L. *Handbook of Oral History*. Lanham, Md.: Altamira Press, 2006. (Good chapter on transcribing and editing oral history recordings.)

Reimer, Derek. *Voices: a Guide to Oral History*. Victoria, BC: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1984. (Another excellent all-around guide. Has good bibliography and appendix on basic procedures.)

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995. (A comprehensive guide to oral history with a good bibliography.)

Thompson, Paul. *Voice of the Past: Oral History*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford University Press, 2000. (Oral history methodology and procedures.)

See also, the *Oral History Association, Principles and Best Practices* (adopted October 2009).  
<http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>

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