

A Beginner's Guide to Oral History

**South Dakota State Historical Records
Advisory Board**

South Dakota State Historical Society

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Oral histories are an important part of documenting the lives of families, communities, and cultures. Although modern civilizations mostly replaced oral tradition and storytelling with written forms of communication centuries ago, the 20th-century development of recording machines brought oral history back into prominence. Not only can historians collect stories from people who cannot or will not write them down, but also they can record voice patterns and visual mannerisms that provide additional clues to understanding the lives of others.

In addition to supplementing the written record, oral history can be an important way to connect younger and older generations, to help the young understand and appreciate the experiences of their seniors, and to provide a means for older people to share their stories in a meaningful fashion. Sometimes the process of interviewing itself can be the beginning of new understanding and communication between generations or between different groups of people.

In 2003 the South Dakota State Historical Records Advisory Board set a goal to improve public awareness of the importance of oral history and to provide training and education opportunities for those in the state who are interested in collecting and preserving oral histories. This booklet was prepared in partial fulfillment of this goal, with funds provided by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

“Getting Started” will help those who want to begin recording the stories of their

family members and friends. "Planning an Oral History Project" provides additional information for local historical societies or other groups that want to gather a larger number of interviews, especially those who intend to seek grant support. "Preserving Sound and Video Archives" offers some advice to repositories that have collections of oral history recordings or anticipate receiving them in the future. "Additional Resources" lists some web sites and sources of publications with information for those who want to learn more about the subject.

Getting Started

Do it now! Preparation and planning are important for successful oral histories, but there is no time like the present to start interviews, especially with older subjects who may die suddenly or become incapacitated. Mistakes may be made and some recording sessions may not work out, but there is no way to make up for the interview that was never done.

Use the best equipment available. There are many good recording devices, and the best one to use is the one that is most comfortable and convenient for you and your subject. The decision to use sound or video recording equipment depends on your expertise and how you plan to use the finished recordings. Test all microphones and recording devices, and be sure to bring extra batteries, tapes, and extension cords so that interviews are not interrupted by technical breakdowns. Bring an alarm clock or timer that can alert you before your tape runs out, so that you do not miss part of the interview.

Preparing for the interview. The best interviewers have both extensive training in questioning techniques, and a talent for getting people to open up to them. If you are conducting the interviews, you need to gain the trust of your subjects, and find ways to help them talk easily about their experiences. Find out as much as you can ahead of time about the person's background and bring an outline that includes important dates, events, and names. Bring copies of documents or photos with you to help jog the person's memory. Make a list of the questions you want to ask.

Preparing the interviewee. Make sure the subject understands the purpose of your interview and is comfortable talking with you. In some cases you may want to include a close friend or relative in the interview, or have him or her conduct it, especially if the subject speaks in a foreign or native language or uses heavy slang or dialect. Oral histories should be spontaneous and not rehearsed, but going over your questions with your subject ahead of time may help spark some forgotten memories. If there are questions or issues that might be sensitive, make sure that your subject is aware of what you plan to ask and is prepared to discuss it.

Do not make promises to the interviewee that you may not be able to fulfill, such as guarantees of publication or preservation of the recordings in perpetuity. Honor any agreements you make, such as not discussing certain subjects or restricting access to the recordings for a period of time, and

remember that future users of the recordings must honor these agreements as well.

If you plan to publish or broadcast the interview in any form, you should obtain written permission from all participants, and if at all possible you should have release forms signed before the interview begins. Interviewees should be informed fully about how the recordings will be used, and what rights they have to control or restrict access. If you think you may eventually donate the interviews to an archival repository, it is especially important to include release forms and written documentation as part of the donation.

Preparing the place. Arrange the interview for a comfortable location, and place microphones and cameras where they will not be intrusive. Try to find a place where background noises and distractions can be minimized. Fans, motors, and open windows can create noises that obliterate voices in the recording. For video recordings make sure that lighting is adequate and that harsh lights or shadows will not affect visual quality.

Conducting the interview. Plan an amount of time that is comfortable for the subject, and if more time is needed arrange more sessions. Use an outline with prepared questions to ensure that all topics are covered, and add follow-up questions as necessary. For a good oral history it is also important to allow the interview to extend beyond the specific focus of the project, to create as complete a record as possible for the benefit of others.

It is important to let your subjects speak in their own style and language. However, if they are repetitive or rambling, ask another question to move on or change the subject. Try not to interrupt, but you may want to stop to ask for more details or to clarify a name or phrase. Unfamiliar names or words should be spelled out. If this cannot be done in the interview, then the proper spellings should be included in written notes kept with the recordings.

Even people with good memories confuse dates, names, and other facts. You can avoid some discrepancies by bringing documents or dated photos with you. Focus your questions on feelings and impressions about events, especially when the details can be established from other sources.

Some subjects may be reluctant to talk about issues they find sensitive, while others may be itching to tell all. Interviewees should always have the right to refuse to discuss a subject. Some people may ask you to stop the recording so that they can talk "off the record." You should encourage your subjects to record their full story, but if there are any parts they are uncomfortable recording for posterity, you should move on to other topics. Oral history interviews should not be "anonymous" except in extreme circumstances.

Ask open-ended questions that allow your subjects to express their memories. Instead of asking where and when someone was born, ask what were his or her first memories as a child. Instead of asking when they were married, ask how they fell in love. Avoid yes-and-no

questions unless you need clarification on a specific point. Oral history interviewers should avoid “steering” the interview too closely, but if you are working with a relative or friend, it can be helpful to give your own memories about a person or event and then ask for a response.

Questions should include specific events, people, and places that are important in the subject’s life. Here are a few general questions that may help get things started, or help fill in some gaps:

- *Who was the most influential person in your life, and why?*
- *What event or experience changed you the most?*
- *Tell me about your best friends.*
- *Who is the person you miss the most, and why?*
- *What are the most important differences between the world you live in today and the world you grew up in?*
- *In what ways did your life turn out differently from what you expected?*
- *What do you think has been your best accomplishment?*
- *What would you like to do that you haven’t done yet?*
- *If there were one thing that you could change in your life, what would it be?*
- *What is the most important thing we didn’t discuss in this interview?*

Making copies and transcripts. True oral histories should be kept intact with as little editing as possible. However, there are many good reasons to edit interviews before distributing them to family members and others, including length, repetitive passages, and content appropriate for the audience. Make sure

the interviewees understand their role in editing and deciding on the final content of recordings or transcripts.

Written transcripts can be tedious and time-consuming to create but are still desirable and should be done if someone is willing to undertake the task. Transcripts should be literal including slang and grammatical errors. If possible, both the interviewer and the interviewee should have an opportunity to review the transcripts and make corrections.

Preserving your work. Master recordings should be marked and kept separately from copies. Masters should only be used to make additional copies, not for playback or transcription. Information including the date and place of the interviews, full names of all participants, and technical data about the recording equipment and tapes should be written on the recordings or kept with them.

Magnetic tapes, such as audio cassettes or videotapes, should be kept in a cool, dry place. Digital recordings face less risk of physical degradation, but they must be maintained and migrated to new hardware and software periodically, or else they may end up unplayable by the next generation of machines.

Placing oral histories in a repository. Oral histories are a vital part of the archival record, and your work should be protected and preserved by placing your history in a repository where it can be used and appreciated by the public in years to come. Make sure that the repository you select is able to preserve and provide access to your recordings in the manner you expect. It is

important to provide the repository with as complete documentation of the project as possible, so that the wishes and intentions of the participants can be respected.

A frequent tragedy that occurs with oral histories is that tapes are never copied, transcribed, or shared because a project was started and not completed. The most important part of preserving your oral history is to share it with others now! Make copies for family members and distribute them as soon as possible, so that they can be enjoyed and appreciated. This will also help ensure that some copy may be preserved in the future, even if the masters are lost or forgotten.

Planning an Oral History Project

Conducting a series of interviews with senior citizens or participants in an important event can be a significant contribution to a historical celebration, or in developing documentation on a particular subject or locale. Large-scale oral history projects often take more time and money than anticipated, and it is important for organizations to plan and budget properly so that they succeed.

A good oral history project may take several years to complete, from the beginning of planning through the completion of finished recordings and transcripts. Oral history projects should be planned two to three years ahead of centennials and other major historical celebrations, so that publications, videos, or other products are ready at the time of the celebration.

Interviews or a group recording session can be a meaningful activity while people are gathered for a special reunion or celebration. Advance planning and preparation can make the experience more enjoyable, and the completed recording or video should be made available to the participants within a reasonable time after the event.

Oral history can also be used for classroom projects and other youth activities, to teach skills in journalism, writing, and other subjects besides history.

Because of the cost involved, and also because oral history interviews sometimes represent unique opportunities that cannot be repeated, planners of projects have an obligation to strive to obtain accurate information of lasting value and to make that information accessible to the widest possible public.

Organizations seeking grant funds for oral history projects may need to meet many technical requirements in order to qualify. Project organizers should familiarize themselves with the *Oral History Evaluation Guidelines* published by the Oral History Association and should also understand the requirements of specific funding agencies they plan to contact. A successful grant proposal should include answers to all applicable questions in the *Guidelines*, and should explain fully how the project goals will be met with the allotted funds and time.

The project budget should include all anticipated expenses, and it should also include estimated values for volunteer time and donated equipment and supplies.

Good intentions cannot make up for the disasters that occur when money or time runs out before the interviews are finished. A work plan should include a schedule of all steps to be completed, with ample time allowed to finish each step of the project.

Depending on the level of funding sought and funding agency requirements, oral history projects may need qualified interviewers and technical staff, proper release forms and other legal documentation, recordings that meet certain technical specifications, and arrangements for a permanent repository that meets accepted standards for preservation of recordings. Outside consultants are sometimes required by granting agencies to ensure that proper standards are met and goals are completed.

Full documentation of all aspects of the project is essential to any future use of the recordings, and includes well-labeled master recordings, technical data about equipment and tapes used, names of all participants, signed release forms, edited and completed transcripts, related documents and photos, and notes about the places and circumstances of the interviews. Interviews should remain confidential until the participants have released the contents.

Interviewers should be selected based on their experience and knowledge. They may need to be trained to operate the recording equipment so that the highest fidelity recordings can be obtained. Interviewers should endeavor not to impose their own values on the subjects and should at all times avoid exploitation or harm to the interviewees. Interviewers

should avoid subjecting interviewees to stereotyped assumptions based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, or other social or cultural characteristics. In any use of oral history interviews the integrity of the interviewee's voice should be retained, and the interviewee's words should not be misrepresented or taken out of context.

A method for selecting candidates for interviews should be stated and followed. There are various methods for choosing subjects for oral histories, including random and systematic sampling techniques, and the method chosen should be appropriate for the project's goals. Some flexibility is needed as well. A great storyteller who is discovered while the project is in progress should not be overlooked just because he or she does not fit in the plan.

Interviewees should be fully informed and aware of how the recordings will be used, and what rights they have regarding publication, broadcast, and eventual public access. Web sites and Internet distribution should also be anticipated and discussed. Even if lawsuits are unlikely, disputes over copyright and fair use can lead to misunderstandings and bad feelings, which can damage a project intended to bring people together.

A good oral history project should be well publicized, and the results should be shared with the broadest public possible, whether it is a local community, an ethnic or cultural group, or a larger region. Participants should receive proper recognition for their work.

With the permission of the interviewees, recordings should be deposited in an archival repository that is capable of both preserving the interviews and eventually making them available for general use. Care of the recordings begins as soon as they are created. Masters should only be used to create high-quality copies, and all transcribing, auditing, and other uses should be done from duplicates, not the original recordings.

Very few repositories in South Dakota have adequate facilities for preserving and providing access to oral history recordings. If you plan to deposit recordings in a particular repository, make sure that it is able to provide the level of care and access to the recordings that you expect. Preferably, project organizers should work with repositories before conducting the interviews to determine necessary arrangements.

Preserving Sound and Video Archives

Repositories that accept gifts of oral history recordings also accept long-term responsibility for preserving them, providing access to users, and protecting rights and restrictions placed on the interviews by the participants. These responsibilities may require substantial commitments of funds and other resources, and should be carefully considered before gifts are accepted.

Recipients of oral history collections should fully inform potential donors about how the collections will be stored and managed. Any specific expectations or

restrictions of the donors should be clearly stated, preferably in a written deed of gift or transfer document. Repositories are responsible for maintaining all documentation concerning the creation and organization of the collection, creating inventories or catalogs for users, and providing access to users in accordance with the terms agreed upon by the donors.

Sound and video recordings require specialized equipment for playback and copying, especially for obsolete formats. Magnetic tapes (such as audio cassettes and videotapes) are sensitive to heat and humidity, and need carefully controlled environments for long-term storage as well as periodic recopying. Digital formats can reduce losses of sound and image quality, but also require ongoing maintenance and reformatting to ensure that they can be played when today's hardware and software are no longer available.

Handling archival recordings requires a high level of knowledge and expertise, including knowledge of outdated technologies. Staff should receive proper training in conservation techniques, cataloging methods, and reference services to ensure that oral history collections are preserved and used in accordance with archival standards.

Repositories assume legal responsibility for understanding and carrying out all agreements made with the original participants in the interviews. They also have an ethical responsibility to honor the spirit as well as the letter of those agreements.

Additional Resources

Oral History Evaluation Guidelines, Oral History Association Pamphlet Number 3

Available online in full text:
www.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/pub_eg.html

Books available from Altamira Press
(www.altamirapress.com):

The Oral History Manual, by Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan (2002)
Transcribing and Editing Oral History, by Willa K. Baum (1991)

Oral History Association

www.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/

The OHA is a professional organization that promotes communication among local historians, librarians and archivists, students, journalists, teachers, and academic scholars from many fields.

American Association for State and Local History

www.aaslh.org

AASLH publishes technical and professional information, including a variety of pamphlets and books on oral history.

H-Oralhist

www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/

H-Oralhist sponsors an edited online newsgroup for scholars and professionals active in studies related to oral history. Its

web site includes information on how to subscribe, a search engine to review past postings, and links to other oral history resources.

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www.sdhhistory.org/arc/arc_shrab.htm

SDSHRAB members are appointed under statutory authority of the Board of Trustees of the South Dakota State Historical Society. The mission of the SDSHRAB is to advocate for the preservation of historical records, educate the public and records caretakers about the importance of the historical record, and lead the historical community in preserving, promoting, and providing access to the state's documentary heritage.

For more copies of this booklet, contact:

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