

## **How to do oral History: Step by Step Video topics for AV Barn website**

### **1. What is oral history?**

Oral History occurs every day. (First person Observations)

- Friends telling stories
- Teachers lecturing
- Family recollections
- Formal interviews

According to some experts, oral history is the transmission of stories that have passed through numerous generations (Sommer & Quinlan, 2008, p. 3). Oral history is the systematic collection and recording of living people's personal testimony about their own historic experiences (Moyer, 1999, p. 3; Ritchie, 2003, p. 19). Oral history interviews contain information that is not available anywhere else (Proctor, 1975, p. 3).

### **2. How do you conduct an oral history?**

#### **Topic A:** Deciding on type of interview/s to conduct

- Life History  
(Usually conducted with an older interviewee that has experienced a lot and looks at history through their eyes.)
- Topical  
(Usually done with numerous interviewees to look at a specific topic like Agriculture)
- Family  
(Usually done with in a family for genealogical purposes)
- Blend  
(Any blend of the above types of interviews)

#### **Topic B:** Picking an Interviewee.

- Any one willing to do a recorded interview could be an interviewee
  
- Make sure the interviewee fits the type of project
  - Cannot have a ten year old give a life history or a commercial pilot give an interview on Agriculture except under very special circumstances.
  
- Could be
  - Parents
  - Grand Parents
  - Neighbor
  - Local government official

**Topic C:** Contacting the prospective interviewee

- Be polite
- usually contact by phone or mail
- explain why you are doing an interview
- explain that it would be recorded
- Ask if they would like to do the interview
- Set up a date, time, and location
  - usually of the interviewee's choosing

**Topic D:** Preparing for the interview

- Do your research on:
  - who the person is that you are interviewing
  - what they do or did
  - and general history of the era in question
  
- places to look
  - internet
    - search engines
    - research databases
  - library

**Topic E:** Preparing Questions

- One of the most important parts to the interview
- questions should be
  - non biased
  - non leading
  - open ended
- some people prepare lists of topics
- always be ready to ask questions not on the paper
- be ready to deviate from the paper
- start with easy questions

**Topic F:** Equipment

- what equipment should I use?
  - audio
    - things to consider
      - format
      - limited
      - easy to archive
      - easily manipulated
  - video
    - things to consider
      - lighting
      - adding a third dimension (action)

- format
- manipulation difficult

- What should I do before the interview?
  - practice with the equipment
  - check batteries and have spares
  - have an extra tape

### **Topic G: At the Interview**

- Dress appropriately
  - dress to the same level as the interviewee
- Bring materials on your project for the interviewee
- explain all the recording equipment
- explain the use of questions or topic sheet
- Begin recording
  - check sound
- Start interview with date, project, and location
- have fun
- Get deed of gift signed
- maybe have the interviewee fill out a biography form

### **3. What do you do with the interview once it has been completed?**

#### **Topic A: Processing**

- If Digital
  - download
  - name files
  - back up
  - make copy for interviewee
- If Analogue
  - duplicate
  - possibly digitize
  - label
  - make copy for interviewee

#### **Topic B: Transcription**

- Standard for using interview
  - cover page with abstract
- transcribe exactly as said in interview
- second: edit out um's and uhh's and check spelling
  - send to interviewee for review and suggestions
- third: edit make changes as requested by interviewee

### **Topic C: Using Oral Histories in Research**

- Oral Histories are a great place for primary source material but not always accurate
- needs to be backed up in a separate place

#### Outside source method

- use a secondary outside source to corroborate what is said in the interview
- Could be: newspaper article, book, journal

#### Triangulation method

- Use numerous oral histories to demonstrate that different individuals had similar or different experiences of the same thing

- Don't forget to cite the interview appropriately

## Works Cited<sup>1</sup>

- Block, C., Joe Conway, Lance Christensen, Leigh Grinstead, Wendy Hall, John Hansen, Tim Hawkins, Jill Koelling, Holley Long, Tami Morse-McGill, Mark Shelstad. (2005). *Digital Audio Best Practices* CDP Digital Audio Working Group. University of Colorado. Denver
- Davis, C., Kathrine Back & Kay MacLean. (1977). *Oral History From Tape to Type*. Chicago, American Library Association.
- Frische, M. (2008). *Three Dimensions and More: Oral History Beyond the Paradoxes of Method*. Guilford Publications.
- Moyer, J. (1999). *Step By Step Guide to Oral History*. Oral History Association website. [http://dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html)
- Neuenschwandwer, John A. (1993). *Oral History and the Law*. Albuquerque, Oral History Association.
- Proctor, S. (1975). Oral History Comes of Age. *The Oral History Review*, 3: 1-4.
- Ritchie, D. (1988-1989). *Evaluation Guidelines*. Oral History Association Website. [http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/pub\\_eg.html](http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html)
- Ritchie, Donald A. (2003). *Doing Oral History, A Practical Guide*. New York, Oxford Press.
- Sommer, Barbara, W. and Mary K. Quinlan. (2008). *Making Many Voices Heard: An Indian Oral History Manual*.
- Sommer, Barbara, W. (2000) *South Dakota Oral History Center Collections Evaluations and Guide Lines*. Sponsored by USD Presidents office.
- Thompson, P. (2000). *The Voice of The Past, Oral History*. New York, Oxford Press

---

<sup>1</sup> Most of the sources in this section could become a recommended readings section for those interested in Oral History methods.