

# **“California Stories Uncovered”**

## **Conducting Oral History Interviews: A How-To Manual**

by  
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### INTRODUCTION

#### **Overview**

This step-by-step manual provides information needed to prepare for, conduct and preserve oral histories according to professionally endorsed methods and protocols. It is intended for organizations and individuals participating in the Council’s “California Stories Uncovered” campaign in April 2005, but can be used by anyone interested in gathering oral histories. Those seeking additional information should refer to the Story Sharing Resources document on Council’s website or the list of links to oral history sites at the end of this manual.

#### **What is Oral History?**

Oral history is the systematic collection of firsthand accounts of people’s experiences. The resulting product — also called an oral history — is an audio or video recording of those accounts. The recordings are often transcribed into written documents for use in researching the past.

Of course, asking people for their version of an historical event has drawbacks. Narrators may bend the truth because of hidden agendas or out of fear of revealing too much about themselves or others. Or they may no longer remember exactly what happened — memories do fade, after all.

Still, oral history is important in that it may gather historical information otherwise not available. In addition, it helps preserve the testimonies of minor as well as major historical characters. Eyewitness accounts help to verify historical facts, and also personalize the underlying truths of the written record. For instance, how much more poignant does the story of the building of Dodger Stadium become when the people who lived in Chavez Ravine are interviewed about being evicted to make way for the ballpark.

## GETTING STARTED

### **Creating a Project Team**

You will undoubtedly want to pull together a team of people to carry out this project. Team members may include:

- Staff with an interest in local history and/or who live in the area.
- Local historians or community volunteers with expertise in the topic being researched.

- A college or high school history teacher whose students are studying a particular historical event or time period.

## **Defining the Purpose of the Project**

Before launching the oral history project, the team should consider the following issues:

- What broad historical questions does the team hope to answer? Is this project meant to enhance the local historical record or provide local color to a much larger historical event?
- Will the project focus on a particular time period (e.g., the 1950s), event (e.g., the Vietnam War, the Northridge earthquake), or social theme (e.g., immigration, local economic conditions)?
- What historical significance will this project have? Is the purpose to create primary documents corroborating known facts or is this the start of a new area of historical research?
- Who is the intended audience (e.g., scholars, local historians, elementary school students)?
- How will the information be used (e.g., to write a book about the area's local history, to enliven history classes, to create a tourist guide)?
- In what form will the oral history be maintained (e.g., audio recording, video, print transcripts)?

## Selecting Interviewers

The project team may want to conduct the oral history interviews themselves, but other interviewers may have to be recruited depending on the size of the project. Good sources for potential interviewers include local historical societies and high school or college history classes. In particular, teenagers and other youth should be encouraged to participate in the project in order to help them develop an understanding and appreciation of living history. Oral histories may be conducted as a class project or individually, with guidance from the project team.

All interviewers should be:

- Thoroughly familiar with and interested in the historical period or topic being researched.
- Able to travel to the interviewee's home to conduct the oral history interview.
- Familiar with recording equipment.
- Willing and able to practice active listening skills.

All interviewers should also be trained in solid oral history techniques before being sent out on their assignments. Experienced trainers are often available through local historical societies and high school history departments; or the project team may want to contact the oral history experts at:

Claremont Graduate University  
<http://www.cgu.edu/inst/oralhis.html>

CSU Fullerton, Center for Oral and Public History  
<http://coph.fullerton.edu/>

CSU Long Beach Oral History Program  
<http://www.csulb.edu/depts/history/relprm/oral01.html>

CSU Monterey Bay, Oral History & Community Memory  
Institute & Archive  
<http://hcom.csumb.edu/oralhistory/>

UC Berkeley Regional Oral History Office  
<http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO>

UC Santa Cruz Regional History Project  
<http://bob.ucsc.edu/library/reg-hist/index.html>

UCLA Oral History Program  
<http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/special/ohp/ohpindex.htm>

California Council for the Promotion of History  
<http://www.csus.edu/org/ccph>

California Cultural Directory  
<http://www.californiahistoricalsociety.org/programs/ccd.html>

Conference of California Historical Societies  
<http://www.californiahistorian.com>

PreservationDirectory.com

<http://www.preservationdirectory.com/general.html>

Southwest Oral History Association

<http://soha.fullerton.edu>

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

### **Preliminary Research**

The oral history topic needs to be thoroughly researched before the first interview. The research will help identify information gaps that the oral history may help fill and interviewers will do a much better job if they are well informed. Oral historians estimate that it takes eight hours of research to prepare for a one-hour interview.

Researchers will want to:

- Scour the library's collection for relevant information. Magazine articles and local newspaper accounts are especially informative when trying to recreate a particular time period or event.
- Consult with local historians or other experts on the topic.
- Review diaries, texts of speeches, photographs, maps, scrapbooks, and/or any other "primary

documents" that provide firsthand accounts of the topic or events being studied.

- Listen to or read transcripts of other relevant oral history interviews.

Once the topic has been thoroughly researched, the interviewer should then compile a chronology of the important dates and events related to the topic. This chronology will be useful when developing interview questions and may even help jog the interviewee's memory during the actual interview.

### **Selecting Interviewees**

Minor as well as major historical players should be interviewed. Although it is natural to seek out the community's best-known storytellers to chronicle an event, their repertoire of stories may be too well-rehearsed for the purposes of the project. Instead, the project team may find the testimonies of people who have never been interviewed to be more authentic and informative. A good interview subject (or narrator) is someone who:

- Has firsthand experience of the events being studied.
- Is willing and able to reflect thoughtfully and honestly on those experiences.
- Is able to recall the past in a candid, relaxed way.

- Has sufficient stamina to withstand the interview process.

Potential interviewees — who may include neighbors and family members — can often be found at:

- Civic and cultural organizations.
- Local places of worship.
- Community gathering places, such as parks, centers and malls.
- Public events.
- Local colleges and universities.
- Local libraries

### **The Pre-Interview**

Once the interviewees have been selected, the interviewer should arrange a pre-interview session to explain the project and develop rapport with the person. The pre-interview may be set up directly by the interviewer or through a mutual acquaintance; or the interviewer may choose to first send a letter of introduction.

The pre-interview is important because it allows the interviewer to:



- Assess whether the person is indeed a good subject for the purposes of the project.
- Assess whether the person's home is a good site for taping the interview.
- Explain the interviewee's rights as a participant in the project.
- Set a date and time for the interview.

The pre-interview also affords the interviewee a chance to:

- Assess the interviewer's interest and level of preparedness.
- Suggest sources for conducting further preliminary research.
- Suggest the names of friends or colleagues who might want to participate in the project.
- Accept or decline the invitation to be interviewed.

## **Developing the Interview Questions**

After preliminary research has been completed and interviews are scheduled, the interviewer should begin compiling possible interview questions. Rather than creating a set list of questions that must be followed exactly, the interviewer should develop a guideline of

topics that will be covered during the interview. Questions should be:

- Relevant to the topic at hand.
- Short and uncomplicated.
- Open-ended to elicit as much information as possible.
- Grouped logically so the interviewee can easily follow the progression of ideas or chronology in the interview.
- Flexible to allow impromptu detours, but organized enough to provide cohesiveness.

The interviewer should prepare more questions than will probably be asked. The questions should also be sent to the interviewee in advance so he or she can prepare accordingly.

### **Choosing the Proper Equipment**

Because the interview becomes an oral history only when it has been recorded, it is essential that the project team carefully consider what type of equipment will be used to permanently capture the interview.

Although some oral historians have begun to use digital audio tapes (DAT), the most popular interviewing medium remains audiocassettes. C-60 tapes (30

minutes on each side) are recommended instead of C-90 and C-120 tapes, which are less durable. Interviewers should use a light, high-quality recorder that features:

- A digital tape counter.
- Battery power and recording-level indicators to ensure the machine is still working.
- A jack for an external microphone.
- An adapter to allow wall plug-in.

Microphones should be freestanding or of the lapel (lavaliere) variety. Encased, internal microphones are not recommended. All audiotapes should be labeled with date and place of interview, plus names of participants. For an extensive discussion on audiocassette equipment, see the UCLA Oral History Program website:

[http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/special/ohp/ohp\\_mag.htm](http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/special/ohp/ohp_mag.htm).

If shooting a video, it is recommended that the camera be mounted on a stand or tripod to prevent excessive movement. Overuse of zooming and panning should be avoided. The project team may want to assign a separate cameraperson so the interviewer can concentrate on the interview and not on the mechanics of shooting the video.

## **Other Equipment**

In addition to recording equipment, the interviewer should also gather together other necessary items to take to the interview:

- Notebooks, pens and pencils or laptop.
- Camera for taking pictures of the interviewee.
- Extra batteries and/or an extension cord.
- Photographs, maps or any other pertinent primary documents to stimulate discussion.

## CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

### **Mechanics of the Interview**

Interviewers should plan to spend no more than one or two hours with the narrator, depending on the participants' stamina. If possible, only one person should be interviewed at a time. Interviews should be conducted in a quiet environment, preferably in the interviewee's home or office where he or she feels most comfortable. Except for interruptions caused by phone calls or restroom breaks, the tape machine should stay on the entire time to avoid off-the-record comments. Interviewers should avoid interjecting their own opinions into the discussion and, in fact, should speak as little as possible.

At the beginning of each tape, the interviewer should state the date and location of the interview, plus the

names of all participants. Tapes should be numbered consecutively to keep the recorded interview in order.

During the interview, the interviewer should be alert to any body language that indicates discomfort or fatigue. The interviewer should make it clear that the narrator may refuse to answer any question deemed too controversial or personal. On the other hand, the interviewer should watch for any cues that indicate the interviewee might want to expand on a particularly revealing topic. If the conversation strays, the interviewer should gently bring the narrator back to the point.

Notes should be taken during the interview, indicating high points of the discussion and the interviewee's emotional state. The use of photographs, scrapbooks, maps and other primary documents may be necessary to refresh the interviewee's memory.

## **Interviewing Techniques**

The purpose of the interview is to stimulate the narrator's memories through empathetic comments and intelligent questions. To accomplish this, the interviewer should:

- Start with easy personal, non-controversial background questions that elicit expansive answers.
- Progress to more controversial topics after rapport has been established.

- Speak directly to the person and not become preoccupied with the recording equipment.
- Be attentive and maintain eye contact.
- Indicate understanding by nodding, smiling and using other active listening techniques.
- Be patient with stretches of silence as the narrator may need time to formulate an answer.
- Elicit opinions and feelings by asking “why” and “how.”
- Ask for specific examples if the interviewee makes a general statement and more information is needed.
- Ask for definitions and explanations of words that have critical meaning to the interview.
- Clarify any dubious information by referring to an anonymous source that disagrees with the interviewee and ask for a response.
- Conclude the interview with a wrap-up question that allows the interviewee to share anything that might have been missed.

## **Collateral Materials**

It is not unusual for interviewees to gather diaries, papers, photographs and other pertinent primary documents, often with the ultimate intent of donating these items — either the originals or copies — to a library's historical archive. If the narrator indeed wants to make a gift of such items, the interviewer should refer the person to library personnel who will then examine the artifacts to see if they are appropriate to add to the library's collection. Library personnel should clearly explain to the donor how these items may be used by future researchers. Any restrictions should be negotiated and recorded in writing before the gifts become library property.

## **Consent Forms**

People automatically have copyrights to their interviews, including the tapes, transcripts and any photographic images taken. Therefore, it is imperative that the interviewer, acquire the interviewee's consent to participate in the project either directly before or immediately after the interview. Consent should be given in writing by both the interviewer and the interviewee by signing a formal contract. The organization or library sponsoring the project will also want to sign as the sponsoring agency.

In general, when interviewees sign a consent or "release" form, they are relinquishing their rights to the interview in all its formats. Interviewees do, however, retain the right to review the materials before they become part of a public collection. The interviewee may also specify restrictions, such as time limits (e.g.,

the interview cannot be made public until after the interviewee dies).

Sample consent forms are available through:

The California Council for the Humanities website  
<http://www.californiastories.org>

CSU Long Beach Oral History Program  
<http://www.csulb.edu/depts/history/relprm/oralprimer/OHagreeform.html>

Library of Congress American Folklife Center  
<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/releaseform.html>

UCLA Oral History Program  
<http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/special/ohp/agreeind.htm>.

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW

### **Transcription**

One of the reasons for conducting an oral history is to capture people's voices as they relate stories about the past. The content of the interview is equally important, however, and accessible only after the recording has been transcribed. Transcripts can be indexed by names and topics and, when bound, can be easily added to a library's collection. Tapes, on the other hand, demand special handling and are very difficult to index.



Still, the task of transcribing oral history interviews should not be taken lightly, as the process is often tedious and time-consuming. It can take as much as four hours to transcribe a single hour of taped interview. Therefore, unless the sponsoring organization or library wants to make the entire transcript available, it is recommended that only the most essential parts of the interview be transcribed. The library or sponsoring organization may also want to consider using volunteers, such as students, to do the actual transcription.

When transcribing oral history interviews, transcribers should:

- Change as little of the narrative as possible. The interviewee's word choice (including grammar) and speech patterns should be retained to keep the flavor of the interview.
- Adopt a standard format for all transcripts (see, for example, Baylor University Institute for Oral History's Transcribing Style Guide
- [http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral\\_History/Styleguiderev.htm](http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Styleguiderev.htm)
- Standardize editorial practice and procedure. Verbal idiosyncrasies, such as "uh" and "you know," may be edited as long as the interviewee's style and the facts are preserved. Emotions, gestures and body language should be described in brackets: e.g., [cries] [laughs] [holds hands 12 inches apart].

- Indicate the beginning and end of each tape in brackets; e.g., [start of tape 1, side 2].

Once the interview has been transcribed, the manuscript should be sent to the interviewee for review and approval. In particular, interviewees should be asked to verify facts and carefully scrutinize the spelling of proper names and places. It is possible that the interviewee may have second thoughts about allowing open access to the material after reading the transcript. If so, the library should negotiate with the interviewee to black out, rather than remove altogether, the offensive portions. Blacked-out dialogue alerts the researcher that more was said, indicating perhaps the need for further investigation.

Transcripts should be bound and indexed before being added to the collection. The library should consider also making a copy for the interviewee.

### Preserving Project Materials

To protect the oral history project materials, library staff should:

- Preserve the original tape by making duplicate copies. The original tape should never be loaned.
- Punch out the tabs on the top of the tape to avoid accidental erasure.

- Store tapes away from magnetic fields, heat, sun and bright lights, humidity, and insects and rodents.
- Store photographs in archival-quality, PH-neutral protectors made of paper or polyester. Do not store negatives or photos in the glassine sleeves provided by photographic developing companies.
- Store paper artifacts in acid-neutral paper, files and envelopes.
- Use soft pencils and indelible pens for labeling artifacts.
- Avoid paper clips, rubber bands, glues, and other metals and adhesives that might result in damage and rust or leave sticky residue. Avoid stick-on labels that leave a residue and may fall off over time.

## **Using Oral History As Research**

Although oral history can provide invaluable insight into historical events, interviews — like all primary documents — must be considered within their context when doing research. Firsthand accounts can be subjective, and memories extremely faulty. Just because someone participated in an event does not necessarily mean that the person fully understands what happened.

Researchers should always strive to corroborate the facts as remembered by the interviewee. Dates, places and people's names should be verified as should the chronology of events. A single interview by itself may pose frustrating questions, while an interview in the context of other data may clarify details and create a sense of the whole. Researchers, therefore, should compare the oral history to other interviews as well as to related primary documentation. Historical truths emerge only when considered from various points of view.

### **Sharing the Information**

Once the project is completed, the library may want to make its public aware of the new collection in one or more of the following ways:

- Present multimedia library programs incorporating the recorded interviews as well as photos, music and other artifacts of the period.
- Organize an intergenerational panel discussion, where teens, adults and elders can discuss what it has been like growing up in the community.
- Produce plays or dramatic historical readings based on dialogue from the oral history interviews.
- Produce a radio program or short documentary for cable TV, using information and quotes from the interviews.

- Create a website with links to portions of the interviews, in addition to photographs, webliographies of historical references, etc.
- Publish a book based on the interviews and other primary documentation collected.

Public programming held in conjunction with an oral history project not only educates the community about the past, but it may also motivate people to participate in similar projects in the future. For more program ideas, please refer to the California Council for the Humanities website --

[http://www.californiastories.org/programs/uncvrd\\_suggestions.htm](http://www.californiastories.org/programs/uncvrd_suggestions.htm).

## ORAL HISTORY RESOURCES ON THE WEB

California Council for the Humanities

<http://www.californiastories.org>

Peter Bartis, *Folklife and Fieldwork: A Layman's Introduction to Field Techniques*. (rev. 2002). Library of Congress.

<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/fieldworkhome.html#contents>

Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Oral History Workshop on the Web.

[http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral\\_History/Whatis.htm](http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Whatis.htm)

Shern Berger Gluck, *An Oral History Primer*. (2001). CSU Long Beach Oral History Program.  
<http://www.csulb.edu/depts/history/relprm/oralprimer/OHprimer.html>

History Matters, *Making Sense of Oral History*.  
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/what.html>

Judith Moyer, *Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History* (rev. 1999).  
[http://www.dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://www.dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html)

Barbara Truesdell, *Oral History Techniques: How to Organize and Conduct Oral History Interviews*, Indiana University, Center for the Study of History and Memory.  
<http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/techniques.html>

Michael L. Umphrey, *A Gift of Stories: A Student's Guide to Doing Oral History for the Veterans History Project*.  
[http://www.edheritage.org/HE\\_03win/guide\\_vets\\_oral\\_history.htm](http://www.edheritage.org/HE_03win/guide_vets_oral_history.htm)

UCLA Oral History Program, *Oral History Resources*.  
<http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/special/ohp/ohpin tro.htm>

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