

Oral Histories

In Manitoba, the Oral History Centre at the University of Winnipeg is an important resource for anyone considering an oral history project.

The Oral History Centre was established in 2012 through approval by the University of Winnipeg Senate and the University of Winnipeg Board of Regents. The Centre's founding directors are Nolan Reilly and Alexander Freund. The Oral History Centre is located in historic Bryce Hall at the University of Winnipeg. The Centre provides training, equipment, facilities, technical support and networking for students and community researchers and learners. The Oral History Centre also develops innovative digital audio and video tools for oral history research, archiving and dissemination, and offers a program of local and international conferences, lecture series, workshops and other events.

The Oral History Centre's website can be accessed via: <http://oralhistorycentre.ca/welcome>

A Guide to Developing an Oral History Project

Heritage Manitoba suggests that groups interested in an oral history project consult the following website developed in 1999 by Judith Moyer, for information and direction on the subject: http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

Some of the most pertinent parts of the site have been included here as a guide.

Introduction

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 finally 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.

Your stories and the stories of the people around you are unique, valuable treasures for your family and your community. You and your family members can preserve unwritten family history using oral history techniques. Likewise you and your community can discover and preserve unwritten history large and small. Oral history is so flexible that people of all ages can adapt the techniques of asking and listening to create and learn about history and historical narratives.

As a door into the world of oral history, the following entries give basic suggestions for collecting and preserving the valuable oral treasures around you, to enrich you and future generations.

What Is Oral History?

Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Oral history is not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumour. 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.

In oral history projects, an interviewee recalls an event for an interviewer who records the recollections and creates a historical record. Oral history depends on human memory and the spoken word. The means of collection can vary from taking notes by hand to elaborate electronic aural and video recordings.

Sequence for Oral History Research

- Formulate a central question or issue
- Plan the project. Consider such things as end products, budget, publicity, evaluation, personnel, equipment, and time frames
- Conduct background research
- Interview
- Process interviews
- Evaluate research and interviews and cycle back to step 1 or go on to step 7
- Organize and present results
- Store materials archivally

Now read on for some guidelines and suggestions. You can make your project complicated or you can make it simple. Pick and choose. Use only what you need to reach your project goals

Guidelines and Suggestions

Oral History Reminder List

Before the Interview

- Decide your research goals and determine if oral history will help you reach them. You may find that your goals change. Do, however, focus.
- Conduct preliminary research using non-oral sources.
- Define your population sample. How will you select the people you will interview? Contact potential interviewees, explain your project, and ask for help.
- Assemble your equipment to fit your purposes. Research and choose the kind of recording that you need to produce and then choose your equipment. For example, does it need to be broadcast quality? Does it need a long life? What can you afford?
- Use an external microphone for better sound quality. This also applies to video.
- Test your equipment beforehand and get to know how it works under various conditions. Practice using your equipment before you go to the real interview.

- If audio cassette taping, use sixty-minute tapes that screw together.
- Compile a list of topics or questions.
- Practice interviewing.
- Make a personalized checklist of things you must remember to do before, during, and after the interview.
- Verify your appointment a day or two before the interview.
- On the day of the interview, give yourself extra time to get there.

The Interview

- Interview and record in a quiet place. When setting up, listen for a moment. Make adjustments, such as stopping the pendulum on the tick-tock clock, putting out the dog that's chewing noisily on the recorder cord, and closing the door on the noisy traffic.
- Make sure the interviewee understands the purpose of the interview and how you intend to use it. This is not a private conversation.
- Start each recording with a statement of who, what, when, and where you are interviewing.
- Listen actively and intently.
- Speak one at a time.
- Allow silence. Give the interviewee time to think. Silence will work for you.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Follow up your current question thoroughly before moving to the next.
- Usually ask questions open enough to get "essay" answers unless you are looking for specific short-answer "facts."
- Start with less probing questions.
- Ask more probing questions later in the interview.
- Wrap up the interview with lighter talk. Do not drop the interviewee abruptly after an intense interview.
- Be aware of and sensitive to the psychological forces at work during the interview.
- Limit interviews to about one to two hours in length, depending on the fatigue levels of you and your interviewee.
- In general, don't count on photos to structure your interview, but you can use them as initial prompts. Carry large envelopes for borrowed and labeled artifacts such as photos.
- Label and number all recordings immediately.
- Have the interviewee sign the release form before you leave or send a transcript to the interviewee for correction before the release form is signed.
- After the Interview
- After the interview, make field notes about the interview.
- Write a thank-you note.
- Have a system to label and file everything.

- Copy borrowed photos immediately and return the originals. Handle all photos by the edges and transport them protected by stiff cardboard in envelopes. Make photocopies for an interim record.
- Copy each interview tape. Store the original in a separate place and use only the duplicate.
- Transcribe or index the recordings. Assign accession numbers to recordings and transcripts. Make copies of all work. Store separately.
- Analyze the interview. Verify facts. Compare your results with your research design. Did you get what you need? What further questions do the interview results suggest? What improvements in your method do the interview results suggest?
- Go back for another interview if necessary.
- If you decide to, give the interviewee a copy of the recording or transcript. Ask for transcript corrections and a release form.
- Make provisions for long-term storage.

How do I ask the questions?

- In general, have a list of topics in mind, not specific questions, word-for-word, and not a specific sequence. You may, however, want to 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, such as brief biographical queries. 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.

Paperwork

Interviewer's Field Notes

Very soon after the interview, the interviewer should sit down and make notes in an organized fashion, before time dulls the details. The notes are something like the anthropologist's field notes. The interviewer's notes tell who, what, when, and where.

They add anything that will help the transcriber or future scholars to understand the interview. If the project is in a school setting, teachers or students need to create a form to fit their particular projects' needs and goals, as well as the students' abilities.

Life History Forms

The life history form can contain very little or a great deal, depending on the project's purposes. Personal data is very useful and particularly recommended if the interview is a family history project or if interviews are to be archived for future use.

The form needs to contain information that helps scholars understand, use, and interpret the interview. Aside from interviewee's name, address, telephone number, birth date, and birthplace, the form might ask for the names, birth dates, and dates of death for parents, siblings, spouses, and children. It could ask for places lived in as well as for education and work histories. It could ask for listings of special skills and for memberships in organizations.

Release Forms

Release forms can become rather full of legal-sounding language, but most oral historians manage to find a form with which they are comfortable.

Release forms make it clear to the interviewee, without question, how the interviews will be used, minimizing the chances for misunderstanding. In addition to offering some protection, release forms also remind the oral historian that the interviewee grants us the privilege of using something that does not belong to us.

There are many versions of releases possible. For instance, you could check Ives, *The Tape-recorded Interview*, Neuenschwander, *Oral History and the Law*, or Sitton et al., *Oral History*, for some tried-and-true examples.

A release usually includes the interviewee's name and signature, the interviewer's name, the date, a statement of permission to use the interview, the name of the person or institution receiving the

permission, and the purposes to which the interview will be put. It is recommended that school projects clear release forms with the school's legal counsel. Especially if the interviews are to be archived for future use, the interviewers also need to sign releases. If the project is in a school, since students are likely to be underage, parents or guardians should sign.

Issues in Oral History Research

How Accurate Is This Oral History?

Once a project is underway, we need to assess and ensure the accuracy of the data gathered. We have to face the question: how accurate is this oral history? At the very least, we must be aware of the limitations of oral history in order not to mislead ourselves into believing that oral history automatically yields accurate renditions of past events.

In oral history, in addition to asking all of the historian's usual questions about accuracy, one must also ask questions about putting spoken words on paper. At first one tends to assume that a transcription of a tape-recorded interview of an eyewitness would be a very accurate record of an event.

As historians we must examine that assumption. We all know how hard it is to find the right words for our thoughts. In an interview, with a stranger listening and a tape recorder running, how closely can the actual words of the interviewee approximate the thoughts that the interviewee wants to communicate? We all know the tricks that memory plays on us, even just trying to recall what happened last week. In recalling memories from a long-ago event, how closely do the memories of the narrator approximate a true rendering of the actual experience?

Our problem becomes more complicated when we try to write down what has been said. People don't always speak in complete sentences. They repeat themselves and leave things out. They talk in circles and tell fragments of the same story out of chronological sequence. They mumble incoherently and use wrong names. When they speak, they don't use punctuation. How is the transcriber to put spoken words onto paper with a semblance of written coherence without changing the narrator's meaning?

Finally, the transcript does not carry inflections of voice and body language. Therefore the reader of the transcript does not have all of the information that the interviewer had originally. In addition, readers and listeners will add their own interpretations in trying to understand what the narrator said. We come to realize, then, that every person, every step, removes one farther from the event as it happened.

Questions of accuracy are not unique to oral history. Problems of accuracy hound us no matter what sources of historical data we use. If we understand the characteristics of our sources, however, we have a better chance of controlling the process to minimize inaccuracies. As a methodological balance to oral history, one can enlist other sources of data such as related artifacts, written documentation, and other interviews. A single interview by itself can pose frustrating questions, while an interview in a context of other data can clarify details and create a sense of the whole.

Therefore, the users of oral history, aware of the characteristics of their medium, may proceed

cautiously without apology. Oral history has come of age and now commands a receptive, respectful audience.

Note of Encouragement

At this point, some people feel overwhelmed. Be assured! As long as you are aware of the pitfalls, you will be fine. Proceed step-by-step, discover the problems, and work through to the solutions. At the end of an oral history project you will understand the oral historian's challenges from the inside-out, and you will forever after look at historical documents of any kind with a wider eye. When in doubt, keep it simple. Part of the process is enjoyment and part of the adventure is learning from mistakes.

Pinpointing Problems in Your Interview

The interviewee...

- is afraid of the recording equipment
- doesn't believe she has anything of value to tell you, and doesn't understand why you would want to interview her
- doesn't remember
- has a series of stock stories that he has developed and is used to telling, almost according to a script. This interviewee is not about to let you deviate from his script
- is not used to telling her or his story publicly, needs much coaxing and reinforcement, needs questions to get warmed up and more questions to keep going
- does not feel comfortable talking to you about the topics you have in mind
 - ◊ for instance, a modest woman might not feel comfortable talking to a male about birth experiences
- meanders through the story, and not according to the beginning-middle-end model that you have in your mind
 - ◊ the memories have a form other than linear time and you have to figure out how to allow the narrator to tell these memories in a way that makes sense to both teller and listener
- is afraid to give private or personal information and thus gives you information that will preserve his or her public "mask"
- prefers or is used to building and sharing a story with others in a group rather than telling a story solo

The interviewer...

- is too nervous to think calmly and clearly about what to say next
- is disorganized
- is not really listening to what the interviewee is trying to say
- has expectations about what she or he wants to hear and is closed to other avenues of inquiry

- appears critical to the interviewee
- is from a different class or ethnic group than the interviewee and so is behaving and speaking in a socioeconomic "foreign language"

The sound...

- is too faint
- contains noise that overrides or confuses the voices
- has more than one person speaking at once
- is distorted

Questions For Thinking About Your Interview

- How did I choose the person to be interviewed? Were the people I interviewed the right ones for my research?
- How did I prepare for the interview? Did I prepare enough?
- What did I use for equipment? Did it work satisfactorily? What changes should I make?
- What kinds of questions did I ask? What kinds of questions worked well? Not so well?
- Where did I conduct the interview? What in the environment affected my interview? How?
- Did my subject want to talk? How did I encourage my subject to talk? What "masks" did my subject wear? Did my subject drop the masks?
- When did I tell my subject the purpose of the interview and how it would be used? Did my plans to use the interview seem to matter to the subject?
- How accurate were my subject's memories?
- How accurate was my subject's reporting of her memories? How do I know? Does it matter?
- Who controlled the interview? How?
- How did I feel while interviewing?
- How did my subject feel while being interviewed?
- Would it be useful and possible to return for another interview?
- How do these results affect my original goals? Do I need to adjust my research design?
- When I transcribe, will I write exactly what was said or will I begin light editing right from the start? How will I decide what to write and what not to write?
- How can I ensure that the transcription is accurate? How can I ensure that the transcription reports what the subject wanted to say?
- Who owns the interview and has the right to decide how the completed interview and transcription will be used?
- Next time, what would I do the same? What would I do differently?