

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMS FOR MUSEUMS AND HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

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Introduction

Oral history is one of the on-going processes of human heritage. It is simply the passing of information from one person to another through verbal communication. Although most people today think of oral history as tape-recorded interviews, the process goes back much further to a time when oral histories were preserved through storytelling and possibly through handwritten notes. Some people simply recalled conversations from memory.

Oral history can add much to a museum or community historical society. Oral history collections give a local perspective to national events or historic eras. They also serve as a rich source of information for exhibitions and for researchers. Although other kinds of primary sources, such as government records, may offer valuable information, oral histories connect the "cold" data to "real" people.

In an institutional setting, such as a museum, historical society or library, a common and very important element of an oral history collection is the written transcription, summary, or synopsis that is available to scholars, researchers and others. Accessibility to the recorded information is crucial so that persons interested in the tapes' contents can move quickly through the transcription instead of having to listen to each tape in its entirety.

Getting Started

Here are some suggestions for starting an oral history program and collection. First, identify the needs of your institution. Are there gaps or missing parts in your research base that an oral history collection might fill? Second, consider what realistic opportunities coincide with your projects or goals. For example, a traveling exhibit on European fine art is probably not going to offer an opportunity for local interviews as easily as an exhibit that focuses on American agriculture. There could be exceptions to this, of course, so careful consideration should be given before final decisions are made.

Because oral history projects often bring about the possibility of artifact, document, and photograph donations to the museum by the interviewee, an institution should consider the oral history effort as part of an active collections acquisition plan. Survey the museum collection for gaps. Does the collection contain plenty of clothing from the first half of the twentieth century, but very little from the second half? Is the collection lacking in artifacts and research that can be used to interpret the history of minorities in the community? Items donated by interviewees serve as excellent supporting material for oral histories and together, the two make for a well-rounded collection.

One way of getting started is to consider a topic that will not only make a good oral history project, but one that might also be developed into an interesting museum exhibit. In choosing the topic, ask the following questions: Is the topic compatible with the museum's purpose or focus? And, are there enough potential interviewees so that a balanced view can be obtained?

An example might be the topic, "Fashion of the 1950s." The topic would be relevant for most community history museums and historical societies, as well as for a variety of other museums. There would certainly be a number of potential interviewees -- male and female -- people who were teenagers in the 1950s and those who were perhaps parents of teenagers during that decade. And some of these people may have a variety of items stored away -- clothing, accessories, and photographs -- things that would be wonderful additions to the museum's collection.

After choosing the topic, background research needs to be done so that the interviewer is familiar with the subject. For "Fashion of the 1950s," research materials may include popular magazines, newspapers, and mail order catalogs from the period in addition to books and other reference materials. Then develop a questionnaire and compile a list of potential interviewees. After contacting the people, begin scheduling interviews. Try to begin with an interview you expect to go smoothly.

Below is an outline of possible questions for the "Fashion of the 1950s" oral history project. Of course, questions can be added, deleted, or modified to fit your institution's purposes.

QUESTIONNAIRE "FASHION OF THE 1950s"

1. General introduction (names of interviewer and interviewee, date, location)
2. Where did you live in the 1950s?
3. What was your occupation?
4. Favorite outfit(s) you remember?
5. Fads you recall (as they apply to gender):
 - a. clothes
 - b. shoes
 - c. hats
 - d. hair styles
 - e. jewelry
 - f. undergarments (petticoats, t-shirts, girdles, others if not too personal)
 - g. makeup, cosmetics
6. What clothing fads were not acceptable by your parents? by your school?
7. What do you miss from fashions of the

1950s?

8. What was your least favorite fashion of the 1950s?
9. Close interview.
10. Ask interviewee to consider donating or loaning related photographs, magazines, clothing, or accessories that would be appropriate for a museum exhibit.
11. Complete necessary gift agreement for interview and any gift or loan forms for artifacts.

Although some people may not believe that oral histories and artifacts from the 1950s, 1960s, 70s, 80s, or even the 90s belong in a museum collection, it is best to get them now while they are still plentiful and people's memories are clear. The artifacts are more apt to be in good condition and donations, whether oral histories or artifacts, can be accurately documented.

The Life of an Oral History (Or, A Processing Checklist)

1. After choosing the project focus and participants, schedule an appointment with the first interviewee.
2. Prepare for the interview by researching the subject to be discussed.
3. Call or send a card to remind the interviewee of the interview date.
4. Before leaving for the appointment, prepare the release form and gather all equipment needed such as tape recorder, note pad, extension cord, tapes, and any other needed items. Check to make sure equipment is in working order.
5. Upon arriving for the appointment, set-up and test the equipment.
6. Get release signed.
7. Explain interview -- put subject at ease.
8. Begin recording and do the sign-on. A sample sign-on would be, "This interview is with Jane Smith. Interviewing for the Friends Museum is John Doe. The location of the interview is in Ms. Smith's home in Soonertown, Oklahoma. Today's date is March 1, 1992."
9. Body of interview, take notes as needed.
10. Close interview. A sample closing is, "This concludes the interview with Jane Smith."
11. Remove tape(s) and render unrecordable (to avoid erasing the interview). To do this, take a pointed object, such as a pocket knife or

ballpoint pen, and break out the two tabs located on the cassette spine (the spine is opposite the open edge where tape is visible). Make working labels(s) for each tape and place tape(s) in case.

12. Thank interviewee and inquire about possible supporting materials such as photos, papers, letters, etc. Also, ask the interviewee for the names of other people that you might interview on the same subject.

13. Write a thank you note after returning to office.

14. File release form in donor or interviewee file.

15. Process gift form and any other necessary paperwork.

16. Assign an accession number to all tapes, papers, and files. Affix a permanent label, with the accession number typed or printed in ink, to both the tape and the tape box. Use a pencil to write the accession number on papers and files. An accession number may be based on the day's date. For example, an oral history tape recorded on March 1, 1992 would be given the accession number of 92.301; one recorded on April 15, 1992 would be 92.415, and so on. If more than one interview is done on the same day, add the interviewee's initials to the end of the accession number such as 92.301J.S. for an interview with Jane Smith and 92.301B.S. for one with Bill Smith.

17. Make working copy of original tape(s).

18. Transcribe from working copy. A transcription is a printed "word for word" version of the interview. Try to be as faithful to the recording as possible. Transcriptions are a very important part of any oral history collection because they make large quantities of information conveniently available to researchers.

19. Check transcription for spelling, etc.

20. Re-type or correct transcription and copy for working file.

21. Do synopsis of transcription.

22. Make subject heading card file cards from information in synopsis.

23. Place original tape(s), transcription, release form and original synopsis in permanent storage.

24. Place synopsis in appropriate storage (will vary with system). Place index cards in card file. Place all other materials in working file by interviewees name.

25. Take a break -- you've earned it.

Checklist of Items Needed by Volunteer Interviewers

1. Copies of pre-interview contacts (letters, phone numbers, etc.)

2. A listing of equipment needed: recorder, microphone (if appropriate), batteries,

extension cord, tapes (C-60's are recommended), etc.

3. Paperwork: release form, gift form, others as needed.

4. A general information sheet that outlines how each interview should be opened and closed, including the interviewee's name, the date and location of the interview, the interviewer's name, and the name of the sponsoring institution.

5. A detailed outline of questions to be asked.

6. A short explanation of the oral history project's purpose and focus. Also, a reminder that the recording is for research purposes and therefore is not expected to be of professional broadcasting quality -- some rough spots are expected.

Notes For Transcribers

1. Use a dictation machine if available.

2. Do not edit! Do not correct grammar!

3. Be patient, it may take three to five times longer to transcribe as it did to record.

Sample Legal Release Form

LEGAL RELEASE FORM	
Date: _____	
I hereby give to (name of individual or institution) _____, for whatever scholarly or educational purposes may be determined, the tape recordings, transcriptions, and contents of this oral history interview	
_____ Signature of Interviewee	
_____ Name	
_____ Street	
_____ City	_____ State
_____ Zip	
_____ Signature of Interviewer	
_____ Name	
_____ Special Restrictions:	

The interviewer should be a careful listener -- asking for spellings, explanations, time frames, and so-on. All interviewers should be reminded that they are not doing a radio or TV program. The recorder can be stopped so that both people can take a break. The

interviewer should also be patient as most interviewees may stray from the subject. Often, recordings will be less than ideal. So be prepared and stay oriented to your interviewee and your project.

In summary, there is no secret to collecting oral histories. However, if staff and volunteers of museums and historical societies want to have a good program, they should remember the following points:

1. Focus on a specific subject.

2. Interview a variety of persons connected to the subject.

3. Plan to integrate the research accumulated, and possibly even the recordings, with other activities, such as exhibitions, publications, or educational programming.

4. Maintain good records and a written transcription or synopsis of each recording.

You are now qualified to begin your project -- your diploma is in the mail!!

Bibliography

Baker, Holly Cutting. A Celebration of American Family Folklore. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.* Highly recommended.

Baum, Willa K. Oral History for the Local Historical Society. 3rd ed., rev. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1987.* Good, but dated.

Community as Classroom: An Oral History Resource Publication. Document Packet Number 7. Columbia: South Carolina Department of Archives and History. (May be obtained by writing to the Department at 1430 Senate Street, PO Box 11669, Columbia, SC 29211). Excellent.

Davis, Cullom, Kathryn Back, and Kay MacLean. Oral History: From Tape to Type. Chicago: American Library Association, 1977.* Good, but dated.

Ives, Edward D. The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History. Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1980.

*Part of the Oklahoma Field Advisory Service's lending library. May be borrowed from most public libraries through the interlibrary loan system of the Oklahoma Department of Libraries.

Further Assistance

The OHS Oral History Office can provide additional information and help to local museums, historical societies, and others wanting to develop an oral history project. On-site assistance is also available. Contact the Oral History Office, Archives Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, 2100 N. Lincoln Blvd., Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4997; 405/521-2491.