

Using Oral Histories to Document the Lives of Your Ancestors

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The term “oral history” is used to mean an unrehearsed narration of selected experiences and events from a person’s life. The narrative is recounted to the interviewer and recorded with the express purpose of preserving it for future use or study. Oral historians document the past by preserving insights not found in printed resources.

- What does an oral history add to family research?
- How to Conduct a Successful Oral History Interview?
 - Before
 - Do your homework!
 - Make the call
 - Day of the Interview
 - During
 - Setting
 - Equipment
 - Conducting an Oral History Interview
 - Introductions
 - Interview Questions
 - Framing the Question
 - How to ask questions
 - What about sensitive issues
 - When the interviewee seems to wander

- What about memory issues
- What about using “props” (i.e., old photos, heirlooms)?
- Concluding the Interview
- After
 - Follow up
 - Transcribing tapes (see www.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Styleguide.htm for a transcription style guide)
 - Continue to conduct historical research
- How should the interview be preserved?
 - Transcription
 - Video Tapes
 - Audio Tapes
- What are the responsibilities of the Interviewer and the Interviewee?
 - Legal Issues and the Signed Release
- Where can I find some examples of oral history interviews
 - Audio/Video tapes
 - Transcriptions

Resources:

Bringing Your Family History to Life Through Social History

Katherine Scott Sturdevant
Cincinnati, Ohio: Betterway Books ©2000

Doing Oral History

Donald A. Ritchie
New York: Twayne Publishers ©1995

List of Interviewer's Questions

Dick Eastman has collected the following questions from a variety of sources.

Grandparents

What were the names of your mother's/father's parents?
When and where were they born and where did they live?
What did they do for a living?
Do you have personal memories of them?
Did you know your grandparents well?
What do you remember hearing about your Great Grandparents?
Did you ever meet them?
Did your great-grandparents, grandparents, or parents come to the US from a foreign country?
Any stories told in your family about the crossing? Do you have any relatives in foreign countries?
What traditions are still practiced in your family?

Childhood

The family house

What type of house did you live in as a child?
Were there other buildings on the same property?
If you moved during your childhood, tell where and when and what you can remember of each house and the family circumstances and the reason for the move.

Family relations, responsibilities, conditions

What was your position in the family? Oldest? Youngest?
What were your duties as a small child?
Who cooked the meals? Who did the ironing?
Did you buy or make your own clothing?
When did you learn to cook and who taught you?
Did you ever learn to sew? Crochet? Knit? Embroider? Who taught you?
Did you ever learn the mechanics of a car; who taught you?
Did your family keep in touch with distant family?
Did you visit relatives often?
How did you get your mail?
What do you remember about family pets?
Were you especially close to anyone in the family?
How did the family spend its evenings?

Family income and livelihood

What did your father do for a living?
Did your mother ever work outside of the home?
Did you contribute to the family income?
When did you get your first job outside of the family?
Did your family have a garden? Who did the work in the garden?
What kinds of vegetables did you grow?

Did your family have fruit trees?
Who did the canning?
Did you raise chickens?
What kind of meat did you eat?
Did you keep a cow for milk?
Did you make your own butter and cheese?
Did anyone in the family sell eggs or butter?
If you lived on a farm, what crops were planted?
Who did the work? Family? Hired hands?

Days, seasons, and special occasions

What did Saturday mean to you?
What did Sunday mean to you?
Did you attend church on Sunday?
Where did you attend church?
How did you spend Christmas?
What kinds of gifts did you receive at Christmas?
Did your family observe Easter?
How and where did you observe the Fourth of July?
How was your birthday celebrated?
What kinds of gifts did you receive on your birthday?
Did your family entertain often? When?
Did your family attend picnics? Family reunions? What do you remember about them?
How did you keep cool in the summer?
What did you wear in the winter to keep warm?
Do you remember any extreme weather conditions (e.g., blizzards or tornadoes or floods)?

Friends and Games

What did you do for recreation?
Did you or your brothers or sisters have any hobbies?
Who was your best friend?
What did you and your friends do when you got together?
Did you and your playmates play any organized games?
Did you ever learn to swim?
Did you participate in youth organizations?

School

Where did you go to school?
Did you ever attend a one-room schoolhouse?
How did you get to school? If you walked, how far?
What do you remember about these walks? Did you walk alone or with friends?
Were these walks hardship in winter?

Transportation and surroundings

Describe the size of the town where you lived or shopped.

Where did your parents shop?

How large or small were the stores?

If you lived in a small town or on the farm, did you ever go into the city to shop?

What was the largest town you remember visiting when you were young?

Did you ever travel on a train while you were young?

Did you or your family own a horse and buggy?

When did your family acquire its first car? What make? How much did it cost?

When did you learn to drive a car?

Where did your family go on vacation?

Outlook

Whom did you admire most when you were young?

When you were small, what did you hope to do when you grew up?

Your Adult Life

Higher Education and Career

What education did you get past high school? Did you study in your adult years?

Did your family support, oppose, or encourage your education?

Who influenced you most and helped you to develop your skills?

Would you choose the same career if you had it to do over?

Marriage and Later Life

When and where did you meet your husband or wife?

How and when did you get engaged?

When and where did you marry?

Did you go on a honeymoon?

Where was your first home?

What is your spouse's occupation?

Where and when were your children born?

Did you or your spouse go into military service?

If your husband went into service, what did you do while he was away?

What memories do you have of war years?

To what organizations have you belonged?

Have you been politically active during your lifetime?

Which presidents have you voted for?

Philosophy and Outlook

Do have a philosophy of life to share with your descendants?

Do you have religious leanings or strong religious beliefs?

In your opinion, which have been the greatest advances or inventions of all?

What things have given you the most pleasure or satisfaction?

Is there anything that has caused you perpetual concern? What events or trends have disturbed you most in your lifetime?

What do you consider to be your most important achievements?

ORAL HISTORY RELEASE FORM

I, _____ (interviewee), hereby give to
_____ (interviewer), the original tape recordings
and transcripts of our interview conducted on _____ (date) at
_____ (place).

I authorize _____ (interviewer) to utilize this interview, in whole or
in part, for history or family history projects, including the possible publication of history or
family history books and articles.

I further authorize _____ (interviewer) to donate said interview,
tapes, transcripts, or materials derived therefrom, to a historical archive (to be determined) for
future educational and scholarly purposes.

I voluntarily relinquish any rights to this interview, tape, transcript, or material derived
therefrom.

Signed _____
(interviewee and donor)

Signed _____
(interviewer and recipient)

Date _____

Date _____