

## Utilizing Oral History to Document the Lives of Your Ancestors

By Gary Shumway

- I. Setting up the interview properly:
  - A. Telephone contact is usually preferable to a letter, E-Mail or text message.
  - B. Indicate and explain your interest in interviewee's recollections and establish an appointment for the interview.
  - C. Be certain to mention, but do not stress, that the interview will be recorded.
  - D. Do not offer to send a copy of the questions to be asked.
  - E. Pre-interview sessions rarely achieve the objective of establishing rapport and often result in off-the-tape recounting of experiences as well as heightened apprehension of the recording experience.
  - F. Have the first recording session as soon after the initial contact as possible.
  
- II. Preparing well for the interview.
  - A. The interviewer should obtain as much knowledge as possible concerning the interviewee's specific areas of expertise, as well as the general framework of his or her life and times.
  - B. A tentative outline of the topics to be covered should be made prior to the interview (but not shared with the interviewee) with ample space left between topics for new areas brought up during the interview.
  - C. Beware of the temptation to overly display your preparation during the interview.
  
- III. Recording the interview properly:
  - A. Select good equipment
    1. The digital recorders now available usually give better recording quality than a cassette tape recorder, but be certain that the digital recorder has the capability of being easily downloaded as a digital audio file on a computer.
    2. If a cassette tape recorder is used, record on C-60 good quality cassettes utilizing an external microphone of the same impedance as the recorder.
    3. Do not use a mini-cassette recorder (utilizing tapes the size of a large postage stamp).
  - B. Practice with the recorder prior to the interview.
    1. Become familiar with the best recording volume level for that particular machine.
    1. Become familiar with the specific workings of the recorder, including the steps necessary to engage the record button, pause the recording, turn the tape over for recording on the other tracks if using cassette tapes, adjust volume, etc.
  - C. Arrange the physical setting as quickly as possible upon meeting with the interviewee.
    1. The interviewer (not the person being interviewed) has responsibility for setting up the interviewing environment with the two seated facing each other, a normal conversational distance apart with the recorder in plain view and easily reachable by the interviewer for making adjustments.
    2. Select a quiet room shielded from outside noises (not the front porch).
    3. Close windows, doors, turn off overhead fans, televisions, computers, cell phones, remove from the room pets, and if practical, everyone except the interviewer and the interviewee.

D. Achieve and maintain good recording quality.

1. Beginning the interview
  - a. Set volume control at best recording level. Do not use automatic record level or voice activated recording.
  - b. If using a cassette recorder, allow some tape to wind onto the take up reel before beginning to record, making certain that the leader has passed beyond the recording head.
  - c. Be certain that the record button is engaged.
2. Checks during the interview:
  - a. Is the recording indicator light or VU meter registering properly?
  - b. Is the interviewee shuffling papers, tapping on a table leg or otherwise creating noises that will diminish the recording quality?
  - c. Are there external noises such as airplanes in flight landing pattern, a T.V. blaring in the next room, a truck or motorcycle revving up in the front yard, or other intrusions that will impact the quality of the interview?

IV. Utilizing good interviewing techniques:

- A. Begin interviewing as soon as possible after arrival at the interview site.
  1. Do not attempt to establish rapport with the interviewee by engaging in lengthy unrecorded conversation.
  2. Do not begin to look at photographs, albums or other memorabilia.
  3. Do not permit the interviewee to begin talking about information you wish to have on the recording before recording begins.
  4. Do not engage in a discussion of the reasons for conducting this interview.
- B. At the beginning of the session, record an introduction that identifies the name of the interviewee, the interviewer, the date (including year) and location.
- C. After the introduction begin the interview by asking an open-ended question that the interviewee will be able to answer easily, with interest and at some length.
  1. Do not interrupt the interviewee during this first "run" even if relevant information is passed over. Make notes of questions that can be answered later.
  2. Demonstrate a strong interest in what the interviewee is saying.
    - a. Obtain and maintain eye contact.
    - b. Either "gurgle" or convey interest by facial expressions and other gestures.
  3. Be alert for topics that should be expanded later or hints given by the interviewee of a desire to be asked to discuss in depth points merely alluded to.
  4. Listen carefully, to be certain that subsequent questions do not deal with information already adequately covered by the interviewee.
  5. Be mentally structuring new questions that should be covered, not merely relying on the questions formulated before the interview began.
  6. If the interviewee pauses, do not ask a new question until very certain he or she is not simply reflecting. Pauses can be very productive.
  7. When the interviewee signals that they have completed their narration of the first topic, pause long enough to allow them to add more thoughts should they have them then ask any follow-up questions that have arisen from what they have said

before going to the pre-planned next question. Whenever possible, ask open-ended questions even in follow-up.

- D. Follow the same pattern of open-ended questions and adequate pauses, with the interviewee sustaining the narrative throughout the interview.
1. After the interviewee has lost the initial “mike fright” and sufficient rapport has been established, the interviewer may interrupt occasionally, if essential for clarifying specific points or to ask an occasional closed-ended question that provides specific information needed.
  2. Be certain to ask questions that will develop topics at length and in depth, instead of remaining on a peripheral level.
  3. If using cassettes, be mindful of when the tape is about to run out. Whenever possible, change a tape during an interesting narrative, not when the narrative is finished. Because the interviewee will want to complete the narration, this will reduce the incidence of interviews lost while tapes are being changed.
- E. Common interviewing problems and suggested solutions:
1. Problem: The interviewee begins the interview by reading a lengthy written document.  
Solution: Allow the narrator to read this prepared document for a minute, then pause the recorder and ask if this written document might well be incorporated as an introductory portion of the interview. If possible, then ask them to talk about some facet of their life not adequately covered in the written document, to get the spontaneous interview on track.
  2. Problem: The interviewee appears to be wandering from the topic.  
Solution: Do not be too hasty in attempting to get the interviewee back to the topic. Very often, good information which the interviewee views as pertinent is being developed by the interviewee. Also, often it is difficult to halt the narration without making the interviewee feel foolish. Since tape is not expensive and truly redundant material can be edited out of the transcript, little is lost even in those rare times when the narrative proves to be pure meandering. If the interviewee must be returned to the topic, a series of closed-ended questions relating to the narrative will provide a face-saving way to return.
  3. Problem: The interviewee begins to stand up in the middle of the interview to look for photos or other information.  
Solution: Don’t permit the interviewee to look for materials at this point. State that you will want to look at photos and other materials, but the time for this is at the end of the interviewing session. If the interviewee is allowed to look for materials in the middle of the interview, it usually results in a serious if not terminal break in the interview.
  4. Problem: A point being made by the interviewee is unclear.  
Solution: If this occurs at the beginning (during the first 20 minutes) of the interview, jot down a note to ask for clarification later. If the interview has already “jelled,” do not hesitate to ask for immediate clarification.

5. Problem: There is an apparent contradiction in the interviewee's narrative.  
Solution: Treat in the same way as Problem 4. Do not hesitate to point out seeming contradictions, approaching this simply as something that needs clarification.

6. Problem: There are topics that are very relevant to the interview, but they are of such a sensitive nature that you are concerned they will antagonize or offend the interviewee.

Solution: Wait until fairly late in the interview to bring up such topics. Very often the interviewee will bring them up voluntarily. Once a proper feeling of trust has been established, interviewees will rarely be offended by being asked if they would like to tell of a certain event from their viewpoint.

7. Problem: The interviewee, when asked about a certain topic, says "turn off the recorder."

Solution: Turn it off. Usually there is a good reason for such a request, and to ignore it can be unwise. If the material discussed while the recorder is off is not so sensitive that it should not be included in the interview, the interviewee might be persuaded to allow it to be recorded. If this is not desirable, a synthesis of what was discussed might be given when the recorder is turned back on, or another interview might be held which would be restricted until some date stipulated by the interviewee.

8. Problem: The interviewee asks your reaction to, or feelings about, some topic discussed in the interview.

Solution: In general, the interviewer should convey a feeling of understanding for the interviewee's viewpoint, but should avoid revealing his or her own bias.

9. Problem: Should the interviewer, in order to establish rapport, pretend to share the same point of view as the interviewee on controversial topics?

Solution: No. Often the interviewer will create an impression of being hypocritical, manipulative or deceptive if this is done.

10. Problem: What do we do with the recording after the interview is completed?

Solution: First, make a back up copy of the interview that will be kept under proper archival conditions in a different location than the original. Next, whenever possible, a transcription should be made, edited slightly to remove false starts or stammerings, correct grammar (if desired) and to clarify meaning when necessary, then returned for the interviewee's review. Optimally, this corrected transcript is then final typed, prefaced, indexed and photographs, captions and other ephemeral materials added, then bound copies are made for interested friends, family members, libraries, etc. The author of this article will be happy to give recommendations of persons willing to help in this process for those who desire assistance. He may be reached by phoning (972) 691-5373 or (cell) (714) 904-6277. His e-mail address is garyshum@aol.com.

- V. Rewards, both tangible and intangible, for being involved in the creation of a family oriented oral history.
  - A. Great opportunity to get to know another person very well.
  - B. Best chance to gather and archive important collateral documentation such as photographs, journals, letters, detailed descriptions of ancestors and other relatives, captions for photos and other documents that will not only give names and other pertinent information, but will provide context for each of these items.
  - C. The detail and depth of feeling often characterized by oral histories will produce a highly readable document that will be valued by other family members for generations to come.