WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history, which is nothing more nor less than a branch of historical research, is the offspring of history’s most ancient technique and its most modern technology. Its technique is the collection of eyewitness accounts to history; the ancient Greek historians did this more than 2,000 years ago. Its technology, the compact tape recorder, is as modern as the space age.

This paradoxical marriage of ancient technique and modern technology is generally credited to historian Allan Nevins. He advanced the idea in 1938 and ten years later founded the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University. Since then the movement has mushroomed. Hundreds of oral history programs are underway in every state and around the world. Columbia still leads the field, however, followed by major programs in selected universities and at presidential libraries.

Oral history has other paradoxes beside ancient technique and advanced technology. Its mode is as simple as human conversation but also as complex as the fields of sound engineering, editing and information retrieval combined. It can be as economical as a two dollar spool of tape or as expensive in processing costs as $450 for every hour of interview. Interviews may require only hours or even minutes to finish, but it may take years to convert that tape into a bound typescript.

Oral history is entitled to credit for some bestselling and prizewinning books, but must also shoulder responsibility for adding both trivia and error to the world’s storehouse of historical data. At its best it demonstrates ethical standards that warrant envy from the historical profession. At its worst it can exhibit frightening potential for violating civil liberties and individual privacy. It is an activity that draws upon the most sophisticated skills of professional historians but also can be undertaken productively by weekend amateurs.
Originally oral history was promoted as a means of supplementing the voluminous written record of celebrities and important figures. This elitist focus has shifted dramatically in recent years. Many newer programs deliberately concentrate on interviewing common people. The trend toward “people’s history” is evident throughout the historical profession, as scholars display a heightened interest in the lives of factory hands, migrant workers and ghetto dwellers. Coal miners and country school teachers are likely to leave few if any letters or diaries. Often their only recognition in newspapers is the vital statistics of birth, marriage and death.

In a relative sense, then, oral history promises immensely more to the subject of social and folk history than it does to our knowledge of the American presidency. This egalitarian bent is a conspicuous feature of the oral history movement today though many established programs continue their emphasis on leaders and elites.

It is important to distinguish between genuine oral history (first hand recollections) and oral hearsay (second hand). But this is not to say that the latter is of no value. It also is important to acknowledge that human memory is a fragile historical source; it is subject to lapses, errors, fabrications and distortions. Practicing oral historians have no delusions about this and they caution users to apply standard tests of historical evidence. But oral history has earned its place as a valuable research technique. When conscientiously gathered, carefully processed and critically examined, it contributes modestly to the quantity and uniquely to the quality of what we know about the recent past.

PRELIMINARIES TO THE INTERVIEW

Selecting the narrator
- Call or write prospective narrators as part of a general survey of information sources relating to your research topic.
- Inquire about the narrator’s background to obtain biographical data and to establish his relationship to the topic.
- Ask the narrator whether he knows of sources of documented information (letters, photographs, diaries, etc.) pertinent to the topic.
- Make written notes of all conversations for future reference.
- Do not broach the possibility of taping for oral history purposes until you are certain it is worthwhile.

Planning the first interview
- Inform the narrator in writing of these points before the interview:
  a. where the tapes will be stored
  b. legal arrangements concerning copyrights, restrictions, etc.
  c. whether transcripts will be made
- Inform the narrator of the topics to be discussed.
- Keep this session short, so that the interview itself will be fresh.
- Make written notes to help you in drafting an interview outline.
- Do not allow the narrator to tell his story in advance of the interview.

Doing pre-interview research
- Get access to as much background material as you reasonably can. Check these sources for information relating to the interview topic:
  a. notes from the planning session
  b. friends and associates of the narrator
  c. books and magazines
  d. local newspaper files
- Your local library can offer you invaluable information and assistance in your search for background data. Do not hesitate to use it.
- Do not try to become an “expert.” You need know only enough to prepare a reasonably comprehensive interview outline and frame pertinent questions.

Preparing the interview outline
- Prepare a master outline covering all interview sessions, if more than one session will be required.
- Prepare a more detailed outline for each individual session.
- Send copies of the outline to the narrator well in advance of the interview so he may refresh his memory, locate pertinent written materials in his possession, etc.
- Do not write out detailed questions prior to the interview. Limit the outline comments to a listing of subject areas to be explored.

Preparing your equipment
- Practice with your recording equipment prior to the interview.
- Check to insure that recorder and microphone are in proper working order.
- Bring spare tapes to each session.
- Pack an extension cord with your recording gear.
- Take along at least two pens, a notebook, and copies of your interview outlines.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW
- The interview setting should be as quiet and free of distractions as possible. Ideally, the interview should take place in a room empty of anyone but the narrator and the interviewer.
An interview is not a dialogue. The purpose of oral history interviews is to learn the narrator’s story. Limit your own remarks to a few pleasantries, followed by brief questions to start off the interview.

- Ask questions that require more than a “Yes” or “No” answer.
- Ask one question at a time, and keep questions as brief as possible.
- Start with non-controversial questions. Delicate questions, if they must be asked, should be saved for later.
- Don’t let periods of silence fluster you. Give your narrator a chance to think about what he wants to say before you interrupt with the next question.
- Relax and speak conversationally. Do not worry if your questions are not as neatly phrased as you might like.
- Do not interrupt a good story because you thought of a question, or because the narrator has temporarily strayed from the point.
- If the narrator does stray from the point, politely pull him back to the subject at the first opportunity.
- Encourage the narrator to be as specific in his responses as possible. Try to establish at each important point in the story the dates, locations, and participants involved in the action.
- Do not challenge accounts you may think inaccurate. Instead, try to elicit as much information as you can, upon which subsequent researches can be based.
- Try to avoid off-the-record information.
- Do not switch the recorder off and on.
- Limit the interview to a reasonable time. An hour and a half is probably maximum.
- Resist the temptation to show off your knowledge. It’s the interview, not the interviewer, that’s important.
- Finally, do not neglect to obtain a signed legal release from the narrator establishing your right to handle, disseminate, and publish interview material (subject, of course, to any restrictions on use the narrator desires to enforce).

AFTER THE INTERVIEW
How interviews become oral history

The process of collecting information through the oral history interview differs in no substantial way from the work done every day by journalists, sociologists, or field anthropologists. An interview becomes oral history only after the information contained on the interview tape is made easily available to historical researchers.

The first step in the post-interview process is the rough transcription of the interview tape. This transcrip-
able cassette recorders now marketed by such well-known firms as Panasonic, Sony, Craig, etc.

Basic equipment for oral history use offers operation on either battery or AC power. It should include the usual volume, play, record, rewind, and fast forward functions (these are now standard on nearly all models). Added features such as built-in microphones and rechargeable battery packs are a definite convenience, but are not absolutely necessary unless one intends to do a lot of remote work. Keep in mind that the decision to buy should be based not only on the machine’s convenience and ease of operation, but on the amount of money one can reasonably afford to pay.

We do not recommend the purchase of cheap cassette recorders. Experience has shown that the sound reproduction and mechanical dependability of machines retailing for less than $40.00 is usually poor enough to make the purchase of such equipment for oral history purposes a bad investment.

Cassette tapes are available in lengths of 30, 60, 90, and 120 minutes. It is wise to limit your purchase to cassettes of 60 and 90 minutes recording time, since tapes longer than that have a tendency to jam. Always purchase major brand tapes such as Sony, Scotch, or Memorex.

Sound reproduction of the name-brand tapes is much better than that of their cheaper brothers, and they are much less likely to break or snag during rewind.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION


HISTORY WITH A TAPE RECORDER was produced by the staff of Sangamon State University Oral History Office. Launched in 1971, the office has produced a rapidly growing collection of oral history memoirs. By 1991 it consisted of 3,200 hours of tape-recorded interviews with more than 1,200 narrators and over 100,000 pages of verbatim or edited transcript. The collection’s emphasis is on subjects of local and regional scope. Among the active projects, in addition to the core of personal memoirs, are the following:

- The Black Community in Springfield
- Central Illinois Business and Industry
- Coal Mining and Union Activities
- Education
- Farming and Farm Life
- Historic Sites in Central Illinois
- Illinois Statecraft
- Italian-Americans in Sangamon County
- The Jewish Experience in Springfield
- The Lincoln Legend
- Vachel Lindsay
- Mental Health Practices in Illinois
- Political Activism
- Radio Broadcasting in Springfield
- Sangamon State University
- Shawneetown Bank
- Springfield Race Riot of 1908
- Adlai E. Stevenson
- Viet Nam
- Women’s History
- World War II

Memoirs are available for study in a variety of forms. All cassette tapes and unedited transcripts are stored in the office and may be used there. Circulating copies of edited transcripts are also available. Memoirs may carry certain legal restrictions on their use; an office staff member is available on weekdays to assist users. Subject card catalogs for the oral history collection are located in the Oral History Office and adjacent to the subject catalog on the main level of Brookens Library. Duplicate copies of most memoirs are housed in the Illinois State Historical Library and Lincoln Library (Springfield). Microfilming Corporation of America sells microfiche copies of most transcripts.

The office has several subsidiary purposes including oral history instruction and consulting, cooperative efforts with private and public agencies, and promotion of public awareness and high standards for oral history. It serves as a clearinghouse for all oral history programs in Illinois, and is responsible for compiling a directory of such programs.

Oral History Office
Brookens 383
Sangamon State University
Springfield, IL 62794-9243
Telephone: 217/786-6521

ABOUT SANGAMON STATE
Sangamon State University has been a part of the Springfield education community since 1969. An upper-level institution governed by the Illinois Board of Regents, the University offers a high quality liberal arts curriculum. Instruction begins at the junior year and continues through the graduate level. University programs include traditional disciplines, innovative programs and professional studies.

Designated Illinois’ Public Affairs University, Sangamon State is mandated to emphasize education in public service. The University addresses itself to specific needs of Illinois state government through special classes, projects and internships.

Sangamon State’s 4,300 students are diverse in age and background. Though the University is primarily a commuter school, on-campus student housing is available. Extracurricular activities include intercollegiate soccer, tennis, volleyball and sailing.

Classes at Sangamon State are small and informal and are taught by a faculty committed to teaching first. Most of the faculty hold Ph.D.’s. All double as student advisers, providing a close working relationship between instructor and student. In addition, many faculty bring their teaching the expertise they have acquired through positions in government, public and private agencies and business.

Located near Lake Springfield south of the city, the University’s 740-acre campus includes Norris L. Brookens Library and the Public Affairs Center. The library holds more than 528,000 volumes, over 3,200 periodical subscriptions and some 104,000 government publications. The Public Affairs Center is a classroom-office-laboratory complex featuring a 2,017-seat auditorium with a stage capable of accommodating large-scale productions.

Attractive interim buildings house additional classrooms, offices and laboratories. As the state’s capital, the city itself serves as an important learning resource for Sangamon State’s students and faculty.