Preserving History the Traditional Way

An Oral History Workshop

PARBICA 17, Suva, Fiji

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Island Culture Archival Support
Today’s Plan

1. What is Oral History?

2. Why Oral History?

3. Preparing the Interview
Today’s Plan

4. Interviewing Techniques

5. Legalities and Ethics

6. Equipment

7. Archiving
What is Oral History?

1. Literally

2. Figuratively
What is Oral History?

♦ Literally

Oral history is the systematic collection of living people’s testimony about their own experiences.
What is Oral History?

♦ Literally

ALL HISTORY WAS AT FIRST ORAL

SAMUEL JOHNSON

PICTUREQUOTES.com

A method of gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life.
What is Oral History?

1. Oldest type of historical inquiry
   But it’s also
2. One of the most modern

“Oral history is the history of people and their memories and feelings.”

– Clara Cook, LSE
What is Oral History?

Figuratively

- You must be inquisitive
- You must strive to find the truth
- You must focus on the other person, not yourself
- You must be fair and thorough to accomplish your tasks
What Oral History Is Not:

- Folklore
- Gossip
- Rumors
- Hearsay
Why Is Oral History Important?
Why Is Oral History Important?

- It gathers data that is often not available in other written sources or records
- It adds life to the facts
- It gives a voice to people (regular people) who aren’t involved in writing history
- It integrates personal, human experience into larger historical and sociological accounts
Why Is Oral History Important?

- It reveals how individual values and actions shaped the past, and how the past shapes present-day values and actions.

- It can help create a stronger bond and understanding between younger and older generations.

- It helps us understand change over time.
Why Is Oral History Important?

- It enables researchers to understand the meaning of artifacts.
- It can help researchers understand what was significant to the people who made the records within a specific collection.
- It helps researchers understand records in the collection better.
Why Oral History Is Important?

"The oral history project is...a way to pass traditional knowledge on."
Preparing for the Interview
Preparing for the Interview

Preparing the Narrator

- Inform them of the purpose of the interview and that it will be recorded.
- Inform them in advance of the types of questions you will ask during the interview.
- Ask if they have memorabilia to which they might want to refer to during the interview.
Preparing for the Interview

Preparing the Narrator

♦ Inform them that the interview will eventually be made available to the public

♦ Make sure they understand and are willing to sign an Interview Agreement
Preparing for the Interview

Preparing the Interviewer (Yourself)

- Understand the experiences of the narrator
- Prepare an informed set of questions (An Interview Guide)
Preparing for the Interview

Preparing the Interviewer (Yourself)

- Choose your equipment
  - Tape recorder or video recorder?
- Practice using your equipment
- Choose your interview location
  - Private not Public
  - Comfortable place
Interviewing Techniques
Interviewing Techniques

1. Preliminary Meeting

2. Establish a Rapport
Interviewing Techniques

- Be a good listener and remain flexible
- Be sympathetic to the needs of the narrator
- Be patient!
Guidelines for Asking Questions

- Keep your questions simple and brief
- Ask your questions in chronological order
- Don’t ask dead-end questions that result in simple “yes” or “no” responses
Interviewing Techniques

Taking Notes and Asking Questions

- Let the narrator finish talking; do not interrupt
Oral History Preparation Exercise
Legalities and Ethics
Legalities and Ethics

Legal Release Form

Two Purposes:
1. To use the information in published writings or presentations
2. To let the public listen or view the interview
Legalities and Ethics

When should the narrator sign the release form?

- After the interview!
Legalities and Ethics

Interviewer's Responsibilities

- Be Empathetic
- Conduct interviews with integrity
- Conduct interviews with an awareness of cultural or individual sensibilities.
- Be honest and transparent
Legalities and Ethics

Interviewer’s Responsibilities

- Treat every interview as a confidential conversation
- Place each recording and all accompanying material in your archive
- Respect requests from the narrator
Equipment
Equipment

Where to Find Equipment?

- Community organizations
- Colleagues
- Local media group
- Colleges
- Websites
Audio

- Is the most-used oral history recording format
- Least complicated
- Least invasive or disruptive
- Available in both analog and digital versions
Equipment

Video

- Increase the amount of information collected
- Available in both analog and digital versions
Equipment

Final Equipment Tips

♦ Practice with your equipment

♦ Make sure you have the “other” recording equipment

♦ Ensure proper storage and preservation for master copies

♦ Prepare for on-going technology changes
Archiving
Archiving

- Multiple Copies
- Physical Storage
- Digital Migration
- Records Preservation
Archiving

Transcription

Definition:
The transcript is a textual copy of the interview that will substitute for listening to a tape or watching a video.
Archiving

Transcription Example:

CIGAR DAISY WITH DAVE HALL
AUDIO OF VIDEO RECORDING
MARCH 25, 1999
Also present—Nounou Meatau

[Throughout most of interview, the sound made by Mr. Daisie whistling wood can be heard.]

MR. DAISY: My name is Cigar Daisie. I was born and raised in Assateague, Virginia.

MR. HALL: Cigar, tell me where your people came from.

MR. DAISY: Well, they tell me that we came from Delaware, somewhere up in Delaware. The oldest person, when I went to school, I learned it up the best I could and that was in the 1930’s. The old Dave Lewis, they called him, married an Indian squaw from the Delmarva tribe and they walked down what is now Assateague Beach.

Assateague Beach then, used to go from here to Ocean City. There wasn’t no inlet to Ocean City until 1922 and that first inlet, so he walked right down the beach on a horse. And he rode the horse and the squaw walked behind him. He settled at Assateague here. Assateague at one time was a big settlement. A lot of people lived there. It’s always been a place where people squatted and fought over it. I guess it always will be. But that’s where he moved to. And later, he moved to Clenchmore.

MR. HALL: Now, in them times, the people lived totally off of the land of course.

MR. DAISY: I’ve lived totally off of the land. Hunting and fishing and trapping and whatever he could. They had dirt floors. My mother was raised on Assateague and it was the same other places. She had a dirt floor.

MR. HALL: Cigar, tell me in your own words about the way people felt about Fish and Wildlife, however you want to put it.

MR. DAISY: You have to go back to the beginning to Assateague Beach the way it was. I mean, the people at one time made their living going to Yarm’s Cove every day. They had a house and a boat and that’s all settlement of people. They go down to the ocean they fished, clammed, fished and they bring them home and eat them. They also put them in a boat and hung them over to Clenchmore and sold them and what have you. Then the Sax Fields bought it. Then he had a man by the name of Airplant. I’ll show you a picture of him. In the picture he has a big pistol on his arm. He took it over and drove most of them people off of the island. It was their livelihood. I think they shot it once or twice. But anyway, then the Fish and Wildlife comes along and takes it. They took it for dead. When you take something away from people that they’ve been used

Transcripts:

♦ Are the most common way for people to use oral history in research
♦ Can last a long time
♦ Will enhance online presentations
Archiving

Transcription Techniques

- Handwritten
- Transcribing Machines
- Transcribing Software
Useful Information

Books:

*Recording Oral History: A guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* by Valerie Raliegh Yow

Oral History Websites:

UCLA’s Center for Oral History Research

Oral History Association

DoHistory: Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History
There’s an old saying about those who forget history. I don’t remember it, but it’s good.

Stephen Colbert