

ORAL HISTORY: AN OVERVIEW

Approaching Interviewees

Think carefully about whom to ask for an interview, and be sure to interview the whole range of community members, not just the “movers and shakers.” Workers’ recollections and experiences may be very different from those of the owners and managers, women’s experiences may be very different than those of men, and so on.

Think carefully also about how to ask for an interview. Personal contact, perhaps through a telephone call, may work better than a letter. Many people are shy, or may feel they are not “interesting” enough, so you may need to be persuasive. Asking for “a chat” or something of that sort might sound less daunting than using the term “interview” up front. Do make sure to explain clearly the purpose and nature of the interview, how long you expect it to take, how it will be recorded, and how the material will be used. Set a date and place for the interview. Some people may prefer to talk in their own homes, where they are comfortable. Others will want a less personal setting. In any case, you need a quiet spot where you can be reasonably sure not to be interrupted.

Preparing for the Interview

Be well informed in the topics for the interview. This will help you to ask better questions and to be more able to spot and explore unexpected but valuable digressions.

Secondly, do have a list of questions that you know you want to ask, and know which areas are really crucial, but don’t let your question list straitjacket you. Your interviewee may have interesting things to say on a whole range of topics you have not expected, and you should be prepared to allow this to happen. (See below under “The Interview.”)

Thirdly, make sure that you are confident in your equipment. If you are using a tape recorder, for instance, practice beforehand how to set it up and make sure that it works correctly.

Legalities

You do need to have explicit permission to use the material of the interview, and this generally means having the interview subject sign a consent form. Some interviews may contain sensitive, or even potentially libelous, material, and it is important to have a plan for how to deal with this issue. Do you plan to seal all or parts of the material? If so, for how long? Sensitive material or not, interviewees generally have the right to go through their interview transcript “just in case.” Of course, most interviews will not contain any difficult material, and a consent form can be signed with no problem.

The concept of confidentiality is also crucial to keep in mind. The interviewer should never discuss one interviewee's recollections with other people. Anna Green, who is an expert in oral history, warns that the potential for hurt feelings and misunderstanding is "enormous" in community oral history. A few words taken out of context can do a lot of damage. You might consider making a confidentiality statement part of your consent form.

The Interview

Make sure to have with you paper and pens, batteries and extra tapes, and an extension cord. As you set up your equipment, you can chat with the interviewee and try to establish a comfortable atmosphere that will help you ease into the interview. In addition to the definite questions such as the dates of events try to ask open-ended questions and avoid suggesting the answers. You might ask, for instance, "how would you describe your factory work?" rather than "I expect you hated your work."

While you ask your questions and listen to the answers, also keep an eye on non-verbal clues such as body language. This will help you to know when to push a little harder for details or further expansion. Do be encouraging and unhurried, do ask for clarification and expansion of details, and do show your interest in what they have to say. Try not to interject yourself and your questions more than absolutely necessary. With a few carefully-designed prompts from the interviewer, interviewees can tell their own stories in their own ways and will often go in unexpected but valuable directions. People often recall best when they just muse along. Don't interrupt or debate with the interviewee, even if you are not convinced of the accuracy of what they say – their experiences and recollections are their own.

Some subjects may be hurtful or difficult to talk about, but if you are sensitive and respectful in your approach you may be surprised how people open up to you. Be prepared that an interviewee may become visibly upset even to the point of tears when dealing with painful aspects of the past. In such a case, the interviewee may prefer to have the tape turned off for a while. This does not necessarily mean they are unwilling to talk about the difficult material – in fact, talking might be a relief. Let the interviewee set the agenda here. The tape can be turned back on when they are ready.

After the Interview

Don't rush away too fast. Be sure to thank your interviewee and have a little exit chit-chat. Let them know where they can reach you and whether you expect to come back for another interview. Remind them what will happen with the tape or transcript. Generally, it is considered polite to supply a copy of the tape to the interviewee, so tell them how/when to expect this.

Beyond any copy made for the interviewee, make a backup copy of the tape as soon as possible after the interview is completed. Make sure that all tapes are labeled

carefully, and store the backup separately from the original. It is also a good idea to write a detailed index of the main topics and stories on each tape – this will make life a lot easier for later research, especially if it can be correlated to the counter on the tape.

If you plan to transcribe the taped material, you might be interested to know that according to the University of California's "Oral History Primer," one hour of interview will equal about 5 pages of typing, which will take from 8-12 hours to complete. You might want to consider a digital recorder. They are coming down in price, and software is available to turn voice recordings into text. Unfortunately, we do not know how reliable is the software. Do not destroy the tapes, even if they are fully transcribed. The spoken words can convey emotions and meanings far beyond those one can pick up from a transcription.

On-line sources:

"An Oral History Primer," University of California, Santa Cruz.
<http://bob.ucsc.edu/library/reg-hist/ohprimer.html>

"How to do Oral History," The Oral History Society.
<http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/>

Thanks also to Dr. Karen Ferguson, Simon Fraser University, and to Dr. Anna Green of the Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand.

Towser Jones, Capilano College
Robert A. Campbell, Capilano College
June 2006