



Introduction to Oral History

Baylor University Institute for Oral History
Workshop on the Web
<http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory>

CONTENTS

Discovering oral history: What is it?	1
Understanding oral history: Why do it?	2
Planning a project: Where to begin?	3
Establishing ethical relationships	4
Preparing legal documents	5
Choosing digital recorders	6
Using digital media	7
Focusing & researching a topic	8
Selecting narrators	9
Creating an interview outline	10
Composing questions	11
Interviewing for best results:	
I. Making contact & setting up	12
II. Getting the story	13
III. Protecting & preserving recordings	14
Making recordings accessible:	
I. Time coding and indexing oral histories	15
II. Transcribing oral histories	16
Critiquing & citing oral histories	17
Reaching the public with oral history outcomes	18
Learning more: Resources	19

Copyright © 2016 by BAYLOR UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE FOR ORAL HISTORY

Permission is granted to download, print, or duplicate this document
for educational purposes only.

For any other use, please contact:

Baylor University Institute for Oral History

One Bear Place #97271

Waco TX 76798-7271

Phone (254) 710-3437

E-mail: BUIOH@baylor.edu

Oral history is a sound recording of historical information, obtained through an interview that preserves a person's life history or eyewitness account of a past experience—but read on. In the pages that follow, this manual invites you to explore the full implications of the terms *recording*, *interviewing*, and *preserving* as you learn to *create* oral history.

- ◆ Oral history *recordings* help listeners better understand how individuals from various viewpoints and different stations in society encountered the full range of life in their day, from everyday routines to catastrophic events. Carefully preserved, the recordings carry the witness of the present into the future, where through creative programs and publications, they can inform, instruct, and inspire generations to come.
- ◆ Creating an oral history requires two people—one who questions and one who narrates responses to the questions. Two strengths distinguish oral history *interviewing*: 1) subjectivity, which allows interviewers to ask not only, What happened?, but also, How did you feel about what happened?, and 2) the partnership of co-creation, which invites narrators to interpret and analyze their personal experiences through their own points of view and in their own words.
- ◆ *Preserving* the recorded interview fulfills the purpose of creating the oral history in the first place. Preservation begins with making recordings safe, advances to making them useful and accessible, and culminates with sharing them in creative ways with others.

Oral history projects are initiatives planned, designed, and executed by individuals or groups to create and preserve oral histories.

Oral history programs carry out oral history projects on multiple major topics or focus on one major theme. Programs may offer training and consultation services for the broader community and they often partner with one another and network with other oral historians through the Oral History Association and its affiliates.

Oral history collections preserve oral histories, including the recording and accompanying derivative materials (i.e., index or transcript) and contextual materials (i.e., maps, research notes, correspondence, photographs, interview notes). Collections are usually administered by an archivist within a library, museum, or historical society. Collections are accessed through a catalog record, finding aid, or digital collection Web portal and are offered to researchers in accordance with legal agreements signed by the narrators and interviewers.

Oral historians

- ◆ come from academic settings, government offices, libraries and museums, medical and military sites, community centers, families, and anywhere people are studying people and the past;
- ◆ stretch beyond their immediate research needs to gather broad-based information so that their interviews address multiple historical questions;
- ◆ seek out people who may otherwise leave behind little or no material record for future generations and ask questions that may have never before been asked about a topic or event;
- ◆ arrange ways to share the results of their interviews with narrators and their communities;
- ◆ deposit recordings, transcripts, and related materials in archives or libraries;
- ◆ produce publications and programs to distribute widely the information gained in oral history; and
- ◆ promote professional standards for research through local, state, regional, national and international organizations.

Oral history helps round out the story of the past.

Oral history provides a fuller, more accurate picture of the past by augmenting the information provided by public records, statistical data, photographs, maps, letters, diaries, and other historical materials. Eyewitnesses to events contribute various viewpoints and perspectives that fill in the gaps in documented history, sometimes correcting or even contradicting the written record. Interviewers are able to ask questions left out of other records and to interview people whose stories have been untold or forgotten. At times, an interview may serve as the only source of information available about a certain place, event, or person.

Oral history helps us understand how individuals and communities experienced the forces of history.

Just think of the breadth and width of history that today's students have to learn! Traditional history courses in high school and college usually touch only on the major events of the past, covering the fundamentals of who, what, when, where, why, and so what. Oral history brings depth to our understanding of the past by carrying us into experience at an individual level. Thoughtful, personal answers to questions like What did *you* do in the war? reveal the ways decisions made by the movers and shakers of the day changed the lives of ordinary people and their families and communities.

Oral history teaches us what has changed and what has stayed the same over time.

Change is obvious to the eye, but oral history allows people to express the personal consequences of change, from the simple things of life—wood stove to microwave, dial phone to cell phone, phonograph to I-Pod—to the more complex—Yellow Dog Democrat to Moral Majority, local production to global outsourcing, country living to suburban sprawl. During interviews, narrators may also reflect on ways their lives remained the same in spite of change, particularly in the area of values, traditions, and beliefs.

Oral history preserves for future generations a sound portrait of who we are in the present and what we remember about the past.

Inevitably, future generations will view—and judge—today's generation through the lens of their own experiences in their own time. The story of the past is continually revised in the light of new interpretations. Oral history enables people to share their stories in their own words, with their own voices, through their own understanding of what happened and why. With careful attention to preserving our sound recordings, the voices of our narrators will endure to speak for them when they are gone. By complicating the story with individual experience, oral histories will help future historians avoid sweeping generalizations that stereotype people, engender prejudice, and overlook important variables in the historical context.

Oral history projects may be carried out by one person or by a group of people and may result in a collection of interviews with an individual or with several people. At the outset of your project, ask yourself the following questions.

Why is the oral history project needed?

- ◆ Determine what information you are seeking, what information you already know about the topic, and what information is yet unknown.
- ◆ Make sure that oral history is the best way to gather the information you seek. Are there people you can reach who can and will tell you what you want to know?
- ◆ Seek advice on your research idea from persons with various viewpoints on the topic. Ask them to help you refine your topic, uncover background information, and locate persons to interview.

What are the goals & priorities of the project?

- ◆ Make it a goal to achieve the best possible recording under the most favorable conditions so that the interview can be duplicated and distributed and, as needed, upgraded to new formats.
- ◆ Determine what will happen to your recordings when they are done.
- ◆ Decide what you will do with the information you uncover through interviews.
- ◆ Create lists of persons able to provide recollections appropriate to your topic.
- ◆ Set target dates for completion of research, interviews, processing, and programming. Prepare to be flexible; oral history takes time!

What guidelines will the project follow?

- ◆ Develop legal forms to govern the interviews and additional donated materials, such as photographs. This step requires choosing who will hold copyright for the interview.
- ◆ Talk to the archivist of the depository to which you will donate your project. Ask what recording formats the depository accepts, what legal agreements are required, and what accompanying materials may be helpful (photographs, maps, interview notes, research materials, word lists, transcripts, indexes, et cetera). Ask how the archives will maintain the oral history and make it accessible to the public.
- ◆ Choose equipment that will best serve the project goals. Determine who funds, purchases, owns, uses, and maintains the equipment.
- ◆ Become familiar with the general principles and best practices of the Oral History Association. (Available at [http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/.](http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/))

Who will do what for the project?

- ◆ Fit individual skills and interests to the variety of tasks available: project director, researcher, interviewer, transcriber, and editor. Additional staff might include a photographer, videographer, archivist, equipment expert, Web designer, and fund raiser.
- ◆ Train staff or volunteers to produce and preserve professional quality oral histories.
- ◆ Plan regular meetings to assess progress toward goals.

What financial resources are available?

- ◆ Develop a budget based on your circumstances and stick by it.
- ◆ In addition to personnel costs, include funds for equipment, recording media, processing and storage, record-keeping, travel, publicity, and program production.
- ◆ Seek sources for support locally or through grants.

Oral history is person-centered research. The creation of a recorded interview is a partnership between the narrator and interviewer. To succeed, the oral history partnership requires mutual respect and trust. With careful attention to the following matters, interviewers will go far toward establishing rapport with their narrators and making the oral history experience mutually rewarding.

Informed consent

- ◆ Explain to narrators their rights and interests in the recordings and the information they will share in the interview.
- ◆ Reveal to narrators the purposes of the interviews and the goals of the project.
- ◆ Explain the procedures that will be used during and after the interview, including how the recording will be processed, where recordings and transcripts will be deposited, and potential uses of the memoir.

Long-range outlook

- ◆ Commit to producing the highest-quality interview possible.
- ◆ The useful life of the interview extends far beyond today, so strive to gather information that will be relevant to future users.
- ◆ You may be the only person who records your narrators' stories, so take time to include their memories on subjects beyond your own immediate interests.
- ◆ Make every effort to place completed interviews in an archives where they can be preserved for the future and used by other interested researchers.

Relationships & reputations

- ◆ Be sensitive to real and perceived differences between you and your narrator (age, gender, race, class, educational level, nationality, religion, et cetera) and take care not to reinforce thoughtless stereotypes.
- ◆ Respect the privacy of the individuals and communities from which you collect oral histories and avoid bringing them undue notoriety.
- ◆ Make your interviews accessible to your narrators and their communities.

Correct representation of meaning

- ◆ Give narrators the opportunity to respond to questions as freely as possible.
- ◆ Do not subject narrators to biased assumptions.
- ◆ Give narrators the opportunity to review transcripts created from the recordings and provide corrections as needed.

The Oral History Association sets the standards for interviewers to follow in establishing and maintaining ethical relationships with narrators, the public, and the oral history profession in its *Principles and Best Practices for Oral History*. The latest edition of the guidelines is available online at <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>.

Narrators must give you written permission to record, reproduce, or distribute their words. With the storyteller's permission, an interview with an eyewitness to history can become a primary document that provides significant historical information for years—and hopefully, generations—to come. Every oral history legal-release form should address at least the following matters.

Donor agreement

Through a contract or deed of gift, narrators agree to donate their interviews to the interviewer, the interviewer's sponsoring organization, or the designated depository. Specific language indicates whether the donor agreement is a contract or a deed of gift. Ask your chosen oral history depository what type of donor agreement it prefers.

Copyright assignment

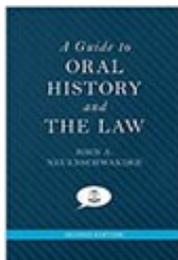
Oral history interviews produced in the US are subject to US copyright law, which protects fair use of the interview in reproduction, distribution, display, public performance, and the creation of derivative works. Before an interview is recorded, duplicated, transcribed or indexed, made public as an audio file or transcript, quoted in a publication or broadcast, or deposited in an archive, the narrator must transfer copyright ownership to the individual or organization sponsoring the project. When the interviewer is someone other than the designated copyright holder, the interviewer must also transfer copyright to the sponsor. Ideally, a release form should be signed before an interview series begins.

Future use

Narrators have the right to know how their interviews will be used. Sponsoring organizations or individual interviewers will benefit from thinking broadly when explaining future use, as technological developments constantly create new avenues for publishing and distributing oral histories.

If for some reason narrators want to restrict the use of their interviews, they have the right to state those restrictions, and the depository is obligated to protect the restrictions to every extent possible. To honor a narrator's wish to restrict the use of an interview for a certain period of time or to limit future use in certain formats (such as on the Internet), provide a legal-release form that includes a section outlining the requested restriction or attach a form that supplements a general release form. It is very difficult to enforce restrictions that are linked to the duration of a lifetime, so ask the narrator to specify a particular future date to end the restriction.

Interviewers and those who process recordings and transcripts should protect the narrator's right to privacy by keeping all restricted materials totally confidential until the restriction period ends.



A full explanation of narrator rights, samples of legal-release forms, language for restricting use, suggestions for avoiding potential legal claims, and even more, are available in John A. Neuenschwander, *A Guide to Oral History and the Law*, 2d ed., published by Oxford University Press, 2014.

Digital technologies allow listeners worldwide to access oral history recordings. A digital recording can be duplicated, transferred to other formats, and edited without noticeable loss of sound quality. Software programs are available with features designed to attach metadata to digital recordings, providing copyright, ownership, and contextual information, and software is available to aid transcribing, with either foot pedals or computer keystrokes to control audio playback.

Digital technology is enhancing the work of oral historians, but the rapid development of new devices and formats requires oral historians to keep alert to changing trends. Fortunately, the online resource, *Oral History in the Digital Age [OHDA]*, is now available with updated information on obtaining high sound quality for collecting, curating, and disseminating oral history. At OHDA, “Ask Doug” about your best choices for both audio and video recorders and microphones. Visit <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>.

Principles to guide your selection of a digital audio recorder:

- ◆ Look for the most durable, dependable recorder you can afford. Favored among the current choices are solid-state digital recorders which record to widely available, high-capacity flash memory cards.
- ◆ Choose solid-state recorders that create uncompressed PCM WAV or AIFF audio files of CD quality (16-bit, 44.1kHz sampling rate) or better. Avoid digital voice recorders that create highly compressed audio files in proprietary formats (i.e., audio file formats exclusive to one company brand).
- ◆ Select a recorder with an output terminal such as USB which allows you to cable the recorder directly to a computer to transfer sound files. You may also want to purchase a USB card reader so that you can transfer your sound files from the removable flash memory card to a computer.
- ◆ Microphones appropriate for recording oral history interviews should be *condenser* types (not *dynamic* types). Condenser microphones require a power source supplied either by the recorder device (referred to as *phantom* power) or a separate battery. For the most secure and least noisy input, select a microphone with a balanced XLR connection, not a stereo mini-plug connection. Test the microphone carefully. Compare recordings made with the recorder’s internal microphone and an external microphone and choose the setup that works best for your recorder in your unique interview setting. Some digital recorders have excellent internal microphones.
- ◆ Look for recorders with lights or displays that indicate that the electrical power (battery or adapter) is working, the recording function is engaged, and the recording sound level is adequate.
- ◆ Select a recorder with both battery and electrical adapter capacities. Use electricity from a wall outlet with battery backup whenever possible. Take along an extension cord.

Are you considering recording your oral history in video ?

Approach video oral history armed with information to help you create the best possible video document and to enhance the interview experience for your narrator. OHDA is the place to learn about creating and preserving video oral history. Learn more at <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>.

*Before you go, practice. Before you begin, test.
When you are done, protect your recording.*

Media for recording

Record to a medium that allows easy transfer to a computer data storage device.

- ◆ Consider the volume of sound data the medium will hold. Each 1GB of space on a memory card holds 3 hours, 13 minutes of uncompressed monaural PCM WAV files at 16-bit, 44.1kHz quality. Available memory card capacities are increasing rapidly. Some oral historians are taking advantage of higher capacities and lower prices of media by choosing to record at higher quality—in stereo, or at 24-bit, 96 kHz.
- ◆ To keep audio file sizes manageable and to facilitate transfer of files to other media formats for storage, transfer, and access, consider using the auto-track feature available on many recorder models; this feature automatically breaks the audio recording into tracks of specifiable size—one hour or less is best.

Media for preserving

Protecting and preserving your interview calls for storing audio files in several secure places in diverse media formats. Oral historians recommend saving the files in at least *four separate places*.

- ◆ First, transfer the unedited, original audio recordings from the memory card to a computer hard drive as soon as possible. Confirm that the computer's hard drive has sufficient capacity for the sound files, which consume a lot of space, and that the hard drive will be backed up regularly.
- ◆ Other recommended places to save your sound files include:
 - Remote hard drives. Save your files to other computer hard drives which also have sufficient capacity and frequent backup but are located in different physical places. Oral historians may save sound files to servers in other rooms, other buildings, other cities, or even other continents.
 - An external hard drive. Solid-state external hard drives are a good choice for long-term digital storage; they have no mechanical parts requiring monitoring or maintenance and are available in very high capacity at relatively low price.
 - Cloud services. Online sources that accept and provide access to sound files are becoming increasingly available and affordable. Investigate carefully all the ramifications of using online services to preserve your recordings. See OHDA at <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>.
 - Archival CD-ROM. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has not issued a standard for original digital audio recordings but does consider archival quality CD-ROM acceptable for the transfer and storage of electronic files. The CD-ROM is unstable, however, and should be used only in addition to secure hard drives. The consumer quality CD or DVD is unacceptable for preservation but can be used for transcribing or public access.
- ◆ Once the audio files are secure in at least four other places, you may reformat the memory card and reuse it for recording.



LOCKSS: Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe

Learn more about preserving digital oral history
from *Oral History in the Digital Age*
at <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>.

Select a topic that

- ◆ fits the mission of the organization or individual researcher;
- ◆ interests the organization or individual researcher;
- ◆ can be readily researched;
- ◆ matches with available narrators;
- ◆ can be completed in the allotted time;
- ◆ has potential for providing otherwise undocumented information; or
- ◆ has potential for confirming existing information.

Focus the topic.

- ◆ A topical focus highlights a single subject of historical interest, such as an event, a time era, an issue or idea, an organization, a place, a skill or occupation. Several narrators may share their memories and distinct viewpoints on the subject.
- ◆ A biographical focus concentrates on the life experiences of an individual. Such life history projects may gather the subject's reflections on his or her life over several recording sessions, and they may include interviews with multiple generations of one family or selected representatives of a particular group who knew the individual.
- ◆ Some researchers collect oral traditions, including legends, folklore, and family stories passed down through the generations. When gathering oral tradition, document also the storytellers' accounts of how they received the tradition, from whom, when, where, and why.

Research the topic.

Why?

- ◆ To locate the story within its historical context
- ◆ To learn what is already known and where there are information gaps
- ◆ To learn more about the person to be interviewed
- ◆ To uncover details previously undocumented, contradictory, or forgotten
- ◆ To establish rapport with the narrator
- ◆ To create informed questions that prompt storytelling
- ◆ To create follow-up questions that encourage detailed responses
- ◆ To clarify names of people and places mentioned in an interview
- ◆ To keep the story on track

Where?

- ◆ Libraries, archives, and local historical groups
- ◆ Public records: deeds, probate records, map collections, military records
- ◆ Organizations affiliated with the narrator (for example: schools and colleges; religious organizations; professional associations; military, social, service, and community organizations)
- ◆ Private collections, including photographs and mementos
- ◆ Newspapers; chronologies of the time
- ◆ A pre-interview visit with the narrator may yield useful research materials.

When?

- ◆ Before an interview (to prepare)
- ◆ Between interviews (to clarify and verify)
- ◆ After an interview (for validity and accuracy)

Oral history narrators have had first-hand experience related to the project topic. They were the doers of the experience or the eyewitnesses to the event.

- ◆ Locate narrators
 - through your research on the topic;
 - by word-of-mouth, from advisors familiar with your project;
 - through notices in local news media publicizing the project;
 - during public events related to the topic (i.e., museum exhibits, town meetings, lectures);
 - through organizations related to your topic (i.e., veterans groups, political parties, neighborhood associations, professional organizations); or
 - through the “snowball effect” as one narrator recommends another.
- ◆ Aim for a representative sample of people who can share insights from various perspectives. For example, for a project focusing on the World War II home front in your town, seek men and women who lived there during the period of 1942 to 1945. Choose representatives of various viewpoints, including people from the diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and socioeconomic groups who made up your town during the war years. Include people who lived through those times at different life stages; in other words, in addition to people who were adults during the war years, also locate informants who were children or teenagers then and who can provide the perspective of a younger generation.

Maximize the interview experience

- ◆ *By getting to know your narrator.* Whenever possible, visit with narrators before the actual recording session to assess the extent of their experience with the topic, their recall ability, and their physical stamina. You may need to adjust your outline because they have limited or very specific experience with the topic or remember some things better than others. You may decide to stimulate their memory recall with some visual clues, such as maps or photographs. You may conclude that several brief interviews will accomplish more than a single long one because they tire easily.
- ◆ *By encouraging your narrator.* For reluctant narrators, explain why you think their personal accounts are important to the overall project. Assure them that oral history allows them to speak for themselves. Begin with simple, direct, open-ended questions and give them plenty of time to respond.
- ◆ *By interviewing one person at a time.* Set a project policy that narrators will be interviewed one on one and inform narrators of the policy when scheduling the interview. The policy provides justification to ask narrators for individual attention and to request that others leave the room when the interview begins. The presence of an additional person may discourage probing questions and inhibit candid responses. One person may answer for, disagree with, or disparage the other, causing the preferred narrator to retreat into silence. The unexpected participant may usurp the interviewer’s role by asking questions and guiding the discussion. Group interviews raise additional difficulties for transcribing the session and limit potential uses of the recordings in productions.

When necessary, partner or group interviews can be made successful with a few ground rules: the narrator must agree to the guest’s presence; the guest must sign the legal-release form; the interviewer will address each question to one person, who alone responds; and no one will speak for or speak over another. Interviewers may want to request a follow-up one-on-one interview with the central narrator.

In the event two interviewers come together to question one narrator, they should ask the narrator’s permission to do so and agree at the outset who will operate the recording equipment and who will pursue which topics. The dual interviewers must listen carefully so as to not repeat a question and, of course, must never interrupt each other.

From your research notes, create a list of keywords and phrases representing the information you want to know. Writing out specific questions may hinder candid responses, prevent your following up for details, and impose a rigid agenda on what should be an open, flexible exchange.

During the interview, use your list of topics as a guide, like a road map, for directing the narrator's attention toward the topics you want to cover. Compose questions around each keyword or phrase that help narrators recall the past and encourage them to tell stories in response.

Sometimes before the interview a narrator wants to know what you are going to ask. In that case, supply the list of topics that you have created to help stimulate memories and build trust.

When a narrator supplies information not on your list but worthy of further investigation, you may want to ask questions about the new topic right then. You can always bring the interview back to the next topic on your list once you have covered the new subject in full.

For example, an oral history with a former resident of a neighborhood that is the focus of a community history project might generate an interview outline similar to this:

Sandtown:

description (boundaries)
origin of name
earliest memories
what was there: residences, businesses, schools, churches, parks
how people got around: modes of transportation
times people got together: when, where, why (politics, sports, play, social life)
racial/ethnic/economic makeup
leaders, characters
relationship to city and surrounding neighborhoods; reputation within the city
holiday celebrations
safety (health, crime, environmental concerns)
effects of Depression, WWII, 1953 tornado; urban renewal; construction of interstate highway
changes over time

Compose questions on the spot from your topic list, adapting the questions to the narrator's individual experience with the topic.

◆ *Ask open-ended questions.*

Tell me about . . .
Why . . . ? Why not . . . ? How . . . ?

◆ *Probe for details.*

Describe . . . Explain . . .
How often . . .
Tell me more about . . .



◆ *Avoid loaded and leading questions* that reveal your biases and suggest you have already formed an opinion of what the answer might be.

Not: Wasn't Sandtown a poor, hard place to grow up in?
But: Tell me how you felt about the place where you grew up.

Not: You all moved to Sandtown because it was the only place you could afford, right?
But: Why did your family come to live in Sandtown?

Not: I assume your family, being Mexican, was always Catholic, wasn't it?
But: Tell me about the role of religion in your family life.

◆ *Restate or summarize.*

You said . . . Tell me more about that.
Let me say that back to you and see if I understand. You said . . .

◆ *Ask for definitions and clarifications.*

Tell me what . . . means.
What is . . . ?
I know what . . . is, but future generations may not. Please tell me what a . . . was and how it was used.

◆ *Follow up.*

What else . . . ? Who else . . . ? What other reasons . . . ?

◆ *Turn things around.*

Some people say . . . What do you think about that?

Also,

Ask one question at a time.

Be prepared to get off the topic, then gently bring the narrator back to the subject.

Use the silent question. Keep quiet and wait.

Close with a thought question.

End with an expression of appreciation.

Arranging the interview

- ◆ In contacting persons whom you wish to interview, make clear to them how their names were obtained and explain your interest in them. Establish at the very outset that you feel that their lives and experiences are important. Explain the specific project for which you are conducting the interviews and be prepared to answer questions.
- ◆ Many oral historians introduce the project and extend the invitation first by mail and follow up with a telephone call. Then, when contact is made, the narrator will be more clear about who is calling and what is wanted, and an appointment can be made.
- ◆ Accommodate the narrator's convenience when setting a time and place for the interview. The narrator's home or place of business may or may not furnish the privacy and quiet required for recording the interview. Have in mind a suitable alternative location.
- ◆ Make clear to narrators from the start that the interview will be recorded and that they will be asked to sign a legal-release agreement form.

Waco History Coalition
PO Box 9222
Waco TX 77777

January 1, 2012

Mr. Arthur Santos
2222 West Drive
Waco TX 77776

Dear Mr. Santos:

The Waco History Coalition is currently working on a project to record stories and gather photographs of the old Sandtown neighborhood, which was home to generations of Wacoans before urban renewal and highway development forever changed the landscape. A mutual acquaintance, Mr. Edgar Smith, told me that you had been his neighbor in Sandtown. Little information exists to tell us today what it was like to live there. I am writing to invite you to share your memories of growing up in Sandtown by participating in a recorded oral history interview.

I have enclosed brochures explaining the goals of the Waco History Coalition and a copy of the legal-release form which participants in the oral history of Sandtown sign, giving us permission to record the interview, deposit the recordings in the public library, and include your stories and recordings in an educational Web site for local students.

I will call you next week to tell you more about the project and answer any questions you have. I hope that we can also set up a time for an interview about Sandtown.

I look forward to visiting with you soon.

Sincerely,

John Sutcliffe

Setting up on location

- ◆ Demonstrate respect for the narrator. Show up on time, be polite. Allow time to answer questions and engage in friendly conversation before and after the interview.
- ◆ Interview only one person at a time, if at all possible.
- ◆ Be very familiar with your recording equipment. The less attention you need to focus on your equipment, the more you will have to concentrate on your narrator.
- ◆ Be flexible with your equipment so that the narrator can sit wherever is most comfortable. Ask permission to rearrange light furniture, if necessary, so that the microphone and recorder are well placed between you and the narrator.
- ◆ Bring extension cords if you plan to use A/C current. If you must rely on battery power, have extra batteries. A small, portable battery tester can save an interview.
- ◆ Arrange as quiet a spot as possible. Be aware of extraneous noises that will be picked up by the microphone—chiming clocks, humming refrigerators, clattering dishes, et cetera—and request permission to make changes to minimize background noise.
- ◆ Set up your recorder so that you can easily view recording levels.
- ◆ Place the microphone, whether internal or external, between you and the narrator. Test the microphone before beginning the interview. Record both your voices, play back the test recording, and adjust the microphone placement and recorder settings as needed. To avoid feedback, keep the speaker volume down all the way while recording.

- ◆ Begin with a general introduction that serves as an audio label. For example:
“This is [your name]. Today is [month/day/year]. I am interviewing for the [first, second, etc.] time [full name of narrator]. This interview is taking place at [address; may include description, such as home of, office of] in [town, state]. This interview is sponsored by [name of organization, if applicable] and is part of the [title or description] project.
- ◆ Compose questions from your outline of topics. Be flexible; each interview is a unique exchange with a unique individual. Let the train of memory association run its course, even if it means ignoring your outline momentarily.
 - Ask open-ended questions first, waiting to see what unfolds.
 - Tailor follow-up questions to the narrator’s responses. Pursue in detail.
- ◆ Maintain a pattern of concentrated listening.
 - Provide feedback with silent encouragements: nod your head to indicate you are listening or smile when appropriate. Keep your feedback quiet, being aware that your sounds can override the narrator’s voice during the recording. Keep your feedback neutral (such as, “I see” or “uh-huh”), indicating neither agreement nor disagreement.
 - Jot down a few notes as the narrator is talking to remind you of subjects you want to cover in more detail. Rather than disrupt the narrator’s train of thought by asking for spellings of unusual words, jot down a phonetic spelling and a clue to its place in the story, then after the interview ask for the correct spelling.
 - Give the narrator time to answer each question fully and finish her/his train of thought, then just sit quietly for a few moments. Chances are excellent that the narrator will think of something else to add. Silence is an integral, important part of the oral history interview process.
- ◆ Give the narrator a chance to think through difficult subjects.
 - Challenge accounts that you think may be inaccurate, but do not question the narrator’s memory or honesty. If you feel you must, refer to other accounts or interpretations you know, asking the narrator for a response or clarification.
 - Avoid “off the record” information or switching the recorder off and on. Assure the narrator that sensitive information may be restricted.
- ◆ Be aware of the narrator’s age and physical condition when deciding how long to continue an interview. Sixty to ninety minutes is a good average length for an interview. Concentration diminishes if the interview becomes lengthy.
- ◆ Make sure that the narrator has signed a release for the interview. The interviewer must also sign a release form in most instances.
- ◆ Continue to demonstrate respect for the narrator. If you rearranged the furniture, return everything back to place before you leave. Send a thank-you note following the interview. Promise only what you actually will do, such as returning to visit again or furnishing copies of recordings or transcripts.

The first step in preserving your interview recording is to download the digital files to a secure hard drive as soon as possible. (see page 7). These additional steps will help you protect and preserve your recordings for long-term future access.

◆ *Create consistent file names.*

- When saving your digital recordings on a hard drive, create consistent file and folder names so that they can be easily recognized and retrieved.
- Use the same file names for all the backup digital files.
- Make notes of the file names and locations on all print materials related to the interview.

◆ *Work with your repository.*

- Make every effort to see that the sound recordings of your oral history project are placed in a suitable library or archives where they will receive professional care and be made accessible to researchers. This may mean donating them to a local library, large metropolitan public library, nearby university library, museum, or state library and archives.
- Work with your repository from the beginning so that you record your interview in a format that can be readily preserved by the archivist and eventually transferred to future new formats as they become available.
- Most archives have tools at their disposal to document and preserve oral history recordings beyond that of the individual researcher. An archivist may embed metadata files with the sound files to describe, catalog, or document the provenance of the oral history interview. In order to do so, the archivist may require information only you can provide. For more information, begin with the essays on “Curating” in *Oral History in the Digital Age* at <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>.
- Make sure all the necessary forms and significant contextual materials accompany the recording when it leaves your hands. This information will help archivists prepare finding aids for your oral histories and will help researchers understand the context in which your interviews took place.
 - ◆ Signed release form or donor contract
 - ◆ An information sheet containing the names, addresses, and contact information of both the narrator and interviewer, the date and place of the interview, the project title and/or sponsoring institution, the type of recording media used, the length of the recording in hours and minutes, the numbered sequence of digital files, and a statement of the purpose of the interview
 - ◆ A list of correctly spelled names and terms mentioned in the interview (useful information for future abstracting and/or transcribing of the interview)
 - ◆ An explanation of any significant background sounds, equipment problems, or other issues affecting the recording or interview content
 - ◆ Research notes, interview outlines, and correspondence with the narrator
 - ◆ Related materials collected during the project, including photographs documenting the project or digital files of scanned photos donated by the narrator
 - ◆ Abstracts, audio or video logs, indexes, or transcripts derived from the recordings

◆ *Publicize the project.*

- Announce the availability of the oral history interviews to local historical societies, other local libraries, and the news media.
- When your project accumulates a number of interviews, consider publishing a catalog of your collection and finding aids to inform other organizations and individuals of its existence and scope.

Time coding: Why?

An oral history is a sound and/or video recording. With the proper technology and training, an oral historian may edit a digital recording to incorporate it into a museum display, Web site, documentary film, or other sound/visual production. To make an oral history recording useful for future editing, use time codes to provide the location of subjects on the recording by hour, minute, and second.

- ◆ Time coding makes information on recordings accessible by subject.
- ◆ Time coding allows electronic synchronization of a sound file with its corresponding subject index or transcript.

How ?

- Using digital playback software, insert track marks with annotations into sound files.
- Using digital transcribing software, embed time codes into a transcript.

Time-subject index: Why?

Indexing or logging a recording by time and subject is a satisfactory alternative to transcribing.

- ◆ Indexing helps the interviewer identify information gaps to cover in future interviews.
- ◆ Indexing provides correct spellings for names and terms mentioned in the interview, thereby enhancing the accuracy of the information for future users or transcribers.

How?

- Index soon after the interview.
- Index by obvious breaks in the topic or by time (every five minutes or less).
- The more details included in the index, the better.

Name: Arthur Louis Santos
Date of interview: January 15, 2008
Location: Santos home, 2222 West Drive, Waco, Texas
Interviewer: John Sutcliffe
Project: Waco History Coalition: Sandtown
Recording no. 0778; compact disc

H/M/S	Topic
00:00:03	Introduction
00:00:05	Description: between Brazos River and South 1st, below Clay St. to city dump; shotgun houses mixed with frame structures; railroad tracks; meat packing plants; unpaved streets
00:08:08	Name origin: not sure; speculates it is from sandy, unpaved streets
00:09:25	Came when he was a baby (he was born in 1930) family moved there from Coahuila, Mexico, because several uncles lived there; provides names of family members: father, Juan Reyes Santos; mother, María Zapata Lopez Santos; uncles, Julio and Ernesto Lopez
00:15:33	Childhood games, fishing and swimming in river, walking past city square to attend Sunday mass at St. Francis Catholic Church

A transcript represents in print the words and extraneous sounds present in the recorded interview. The transcriber's goal is to render as close a replica to the actual event as possible.

Why transcribe?

- ◆ Transcripts make the information on the recording easier to locate and assemble for use in media presentations, exhibits, and research publications.
- ◆ Researchers often prefer the ease of looking through a transcript for topics related to their interests over listening to a recording, especially if the recording format is outmoded.
- ◆ New technologies for online digital presentations allow the coordination of sound recordings and transcripts.
- ◆ Narrators still attach prestige to having a print document of their stories.
- ◆ Narrators may preview the draft transcript and provide spellings of proper names and clarification of misunderstood information, resulting in a more accurate account.
- ◆ Transcripts may be coded by time to match the recording and may be indexed by page to provide access to subjects, names, and terms
- ◆ The shelf life of paper far exceeds the brief time a recording format exists before it is replaced by a newer, more advanced format. Even if the medium lasts, the playback equipment does not. Reformatting to new media is expensive.
- ◆ Software is available for transcribing audio on your computer. Foot pedals with USB connections help control playback while transcribing. *Express Scribe* is an open-source, downloadable software available at <http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/>. The *StartStop Digital Transcription System* is available for purchase from <http://www.startstop.com/>.

Transcribing is worthwhile, but remember . . .

- ◆ transcribing is time-consuming. The approximate time required to transcribe one recorded hour is 10-12 hours, depending upon the quality of the sound recording and complexity of the interview.
- ◆ transcribing is labor-intensive work and therefore expensive. Also, extra administrative costs are involved.
- ◆ a transcript cannot help but distort what is actually on the sound recording—sarcasm may go unnoticed, for example. The unique personality of the narrator is missing no matter how verbatim the transcript. Many oral historians believe that researchers should listen to the recordings themselves, making their own interpretive judgments rather than relying on the transcript.

When you transcribe . . .

- ◆ change as little as possible. The narrator's word choice, including grammar and speech patterns, should be accurately represented. Verbatim renderings of slang and regional pronunciations are the prerogative of each project, but, if used, should be consistent.
- ◆ adopt a standard format for manuscripts. The *Chicago Manual of Style* is recommended. Also, adopt one dictionary for use throughout the project.
- ◆ use a guide, such as the *Style Guide* furnished online by the Baylor Institute for Oral History at <http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=23607>.
- ◆ standardize editorial practice and procedure. Allow the narrator to preview the transcript, if feasible, and present her/him a copy of the final, corrected draft.

Analyze the content of an interview.

Like any other primary document, an oral history must be explored for validity and accuracy. Listen to the sound recording or read the transcript and ask yourself:

- ◆ What are the most important points made in this interview?
- ◆ What patterns, key phrases, themes emerge from the stories told?
- ◆ How does the narrator express his/her feelings about the topic? Listen not only to what is said but how it is said.
- ◆ What do these stories teach me about the topic?
- ◆ How are the narrator's stories like and different from other versions of the topic? Why? What does this interview tell me that the other sources left out?
- ◆ What other questions might this narrator be able to answer about the topic?
- ◆ Based on what this interview uncovers, what additional research do I need to do to learn more about the topic or verify these stories?

Evaluate your recording and interviewing techniques.

<p>Listen to your recording and ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Is the technical quality good?</i> • <i>Is the audio clear? volume strong?</i> • <i>Is there background noise?</i> • <i>What should I do differently next time?</i> 	<p>Listen to your recording and ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Did I ask open-ended questions? leading questions? good follow-up questions?</i> • <i>What did I learn about doing interviews from this experience?</i> • <i>What should I do differently next time?</i>
---	---

Cite use of oral history sources.

Oral histories are usually considered unpublished primary materials. Bound, paginated transcripts deposited in an archives may be considered limited publications and such citations may include page numbers. In citing oral histories, provide sufficient information to lead the interested reader to the physical location of the cited source: narrator name (as author); interviewer name; date and place of interview; type of interview material (i.e., audio cassette; open reel tape; compact disc, CD-ROM, DVD, transcript, etc.); and physical location of materials.

Examples of notes (N) and bibliographic forms (B):

For recordings:

N 1. Albert Harry Reed, interview by Stephen Sloan, October 9, 2007, in Waco, Texas, compact disc, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

B Reed, Albert Harry. Interview by Stephen Sloan. October 9, 2007, in Waco, Texas. Compact disc. Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

For online transcripts:

N 2. Lonnie Belle Hodges, interview by Vivienne Malone-Mayes, August 30, 1990, in Waco, Texas, transcript, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, TX, available online at <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/ref/collection/buioh/id/5361>.

B Hodges, Lonnie Belle. Interview by Vivienne Malone-Mayes. August 30, 1990, in Waco, Texas. Transcript. Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, TX. <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/ref/collection/buioh/id/5361> (accessed June 10, 2014).

For print transcripts deposited in an archives:

N 3. Abner Anglin Hyden, "Oral Memoirs of Abner Anglin Hyden," interview by Lois E. Myers on January 20, 1998, in Waco, Texas (Waco, TX: Baylor University Institute for Oral History, 2001), 22.

B Hyden, Abner Anglin. "Oral Memoirs of Abner Anglin Hyden." Interviewed by Lois E. Myers on six occasions from 20 January to 19 August, 1998, in Waco, Texas. Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, TX.

If you do nothing more than collect and preserve interviews—a large undertaking in itself—you have rendered future generations a valuable service. But the outcomes of the interviewing process can be packaged in innovative ways to reach the public. Indeed, some oral historians argue that public programming not only educates the public about the past but motivates the participants in a project and perhaps inspires persons to volunteer as narrators and helpers.

The process from production through editing to publishing requires significant amounts of time, thought, planning, and energy, not to mention money; but the product, whether it is a radio series, video documentary, Internet site, or book, can repay the investment by increasing public enlightenment and creating favorable publicity for the project.

- ◆ If public programming or publication is your goal, remember to plan carefully from the outset. Go for the highest possible sound quality in your recordings and best visual interest in your video or digital pictures. Obtain the best recorders and microphones you can afford, even if you have to rent them. Then, practice using the equipment before every interview.
- ◆ You may wish to take photographs of narrators for use later in slide shows, exhibits, or publications. Also, you may want to ask narrators for permission to make copies of their personal photos or documents that might enhance the project.
- ◆ After the interview, an index or transcript will be most helpful, if not essential, for preparing publications or programs.
- ◆ A signed legal-release form transferring copyright is a must for those considering the creation of public programs. Ethical practice requires you to tell the narrator that the recording might be used in a production or publication. Because of user restrictions, subject, or quality, some interviews may not lend themselves to public distribution.

Consider these possibilities . . . and then think of more.

- ◆ Video or audio productions or simple PowerPoint shows incorporating oral history recordings, old photographs, and period music
- ◆ Plays, monologues, dramatic readings, art work, or musical compositions based on oral history stories and storytellers
- ◆ Productions or vignettes for radio stations, podcasts, or television. For this type of series, oral history recordings must be high quality.
- ◆ Digital audio and/or transcripts or essays displayed on the World Wide Web
- ◆ Bound volumes of transcripts, possibly including photographs and other material relating to the narrators and the topic under study
- ◆ Regular columns in a hometown newspaper or Sunday supplement magazine
- ◆ Magazines, journals, or pamphlets of community oral history, folklore, and folk craft
- ◆ Tours of community sites based on information shared in oral histories
- ◆ Community-wide reception for participants in the project, including exhibits and listening stations
- ◆ Museum exhibits or traveling displays incorporating quotations or sound bites from audio recordings

Print Materials

- Charlton, Thomas L., Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds. *Handbook of Oral History*. AltaMira Press, 2006. Reprinted in two parts, *History of Oral History* (2007) and *Thinking about Oral History* (2008).
- DeBlasio, Donna M., Charles F. Ganzert, David H. Mould, Stephen H. Paschen, and Howard L. Sacks. *Catching Stories: A Practical Guide to Oral History*. Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, 2009.
- Lanham, Barry A., and Laura M. Wendling. *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education*. AltaMira Press, 2006.
- MacKay, Nancy, Mary Kay Quinlan, and Barbara W. Sommer. *Community Oral History Toolkit*. 5 vols. Left Coast Press, 2013.
- Neuenschwander, John A. *A Guide to Oral History and the Law*. 2d ed. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History*. 3d ed. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Ritchie, Donald A., ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Yow, Valerie Raleigh. *Recording Oral History*. 3d ed. Rowman and Littlefield, 2014.

Internet Resources

- Baylor University Institute for Oral History. <http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/>
Introductory and advanced instruction in the Workshop on the Web
- Oral History Association. <http://www.oralhistory.org>
News on annual conferences, resources on best practices, information on digital technology, links to the online *Oral History Review* and to oral history centers and collections
- Oral History in the Digital Age. <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>
What you need to know about digital technology for oral history from experts in audio and video recording and preservation
- Oral History List Serv. <https://networks.h-net.org/h-oralhist>
Links to centers, methods, projects, state and regional oral history associations, plus searchable archives of the discussion list for oral historians worldwide
- Texas Oral History Association. <http://www.baylor.edu/toha/>
State network, with online newsletter and information on journal, awards, and membership