



## ***“Why? My Life Wasn’t Special”***

### ***Finding the stories through an Oral History project***

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Oral histories gathers information about the past from those that observed, participated, and lived in a time we may have little knowledge of. Collecting that information and the associated stories brings their family to life. Whether formal or informal, a good oral history project requires planning. Planning, preparation, and how you conduct an oral history project will reward you with precious stories that would have been lost with the passing of generations.

### **Before the Interview**

- Set goals for your project
  - Create a summary about your project and what you want to learn.
  - A person’s stories, their lifetime, or generations connection them.
  - Tone - informal discussion, storytelling, lecture,
  - What do you already know about the person or topic?
  - What do you need to research before the interview takes place?
  - Who do you want to interview, one person or several? Will you be conducting the interview one-on-one or as a couple?
  - List those to interview.
  - Who is your audience?
  - What will be your end product?
    - Audio only – podcast style
    - Visual - PowerPoint, video, photo album, scrapbook
    - Publication (printed or e-book) – biography, journal style, family history book, family newsletter, recipe book, timeline, website/blog
    - Combination of several above
- Informal or formal interview format
- Set up the date, time and location for the interview. One to two hours should be your limit per session.
- How to conduct the interview.
  - Letters/Email
  - In person
  - Phone
  - Zoom
- Will you record the interview? Gather the equipment needed.
  - Pen/Paper
  - Audio recorder
  - Online
  - Video recorded –
    - Equipment - phone, tripod, lighting,
    - Framing the interviewee - choose a background that will not distract
- Allow time for setting up and taking down equipment



- Prepare memory joggers
  - Documents
  - Photos –
  - Family keepsakes
  - Make copies or scans to use as memory joggers
  - Knowledge of national or local historical events
- Prepare questions/outline
  - Ask open-ended questions, avoid leading questions, those that only require yes or no responses.
  - Be sensitive to topics out of your reach
  - Keep in mind you are speaking for a third person, your audience, they may not know your common history with your interviewee.
- Your personal appearance
- Consider using a consent form which also explains the interview process and rights and responsibilities of both parties. A “deed of gift”, a release form, or a permission form that summarizes what will done with completed interview and grants you permission to use the interview with any restriction from the interviewee.
- Give the interviewee an information sheet with your contact information, and the summary or a checklist of what to expect during the interview. It may also include their rights as the interviewee.

## **During the Interview**

- Review the location to make sure the location will minimize the chance of other people wandering in, phone calls or other interruptions.
- Place equipment so it is not intrusive
  - Audio – place microphone between yourself and the interviewee but the recorder out of sight if possible, know its limitations and strengths
  - Will you be on or off camera? Test the camera in its location before starting the interview. Show the interviewee the playback.
  - Wait for the interviewee to decide when to begin.
  - Couple interviews have their own unique issues. Remember the focus of the interview.
- Start recording with an introduction stating the name of the interviewer and interviewee names, where, when and the why the interview is being done. If this is a continued recording, include the part number.
- Then ease into the interview with some biographical information about the interviewee. These simple questions help ease the interviewee into the recording and allow this information to be at the beginning of the recording.
- Your tone will be copied by the interviewee, so speak calmly and clearly.
- After you ask a question wait and allow time for the interviewee to process before answering. Silence can be golden. Patience and listening are very important throughout the entire interview.
- Ask the question in a different way or ask a follow up question for more details such as: What happened next? Could you give me an example? What are the steps to do that?
- Use your prepared memory joggers but don’t get them out all at once. If you have an outline you will know when they may be helpful.

- Don't make the outline or questions rule the interview. Use questions as a guide but don't be afraid to allow the interviewee to get sidetracked. Treasured stories may be told as the memories start flowing.
- Use transition question to move to a different topic.
- If this is an audio only recording verbalize gestures or pointing to something.
- Stay in tune to other stories the interviewee may infer to during the interview.
- Remember to ask questions about daily life: songs, childhood games, songs of the time, unusual memories. Ask follow up questions for details.
  - Personalities and relationships
  - Family characteristics
  - Family facts
  - Home and community life
  - Economic conditions
  - Local and world events
  - Life in the "Old Country" and the trip over
- Consider asking questions that involve different type of responses.
  - Behaviors – what they were doing
  - Opinions and values
  - Feelings
  - Knowledge on the topic
  - Sensory – what they saw, touched, tasted like, heard or smelled
  - Background
- As memories start flowing, the interviewee may become emotional. Be sensitive to the interviewee, put them at ease. It may help them share even the very difficult memories and stories.
- Focus on the interviewee giving little attention to the equipment. Remember it as about the interviewee.
- Do not turn off the recording during the interview unless the interviewee requests it.
- If it is a longer interview, create regular breaks. Remember to turn the recording back on.
- Take notes during interview but do it casually.
- Wrap up the interview with lighter questions.

## **After the Interview**

- Don't put the equipment away immediately after the interview. May hear the best stories after the interview is over. With the interviewee's permission you may want to record one last story.
- Thank the interviewee and chat about the process.
- Make sure the deed of gift or permission form is signed. If the interviewee requests something to happen before it is signed review those guidelines with them.
- Make copies of the recording
  - Store copies in different formats and locations.
  - Label the recordings completely and clearly, the physical recording and the digital files. Use the interviewee full name and date in the file name.
- Process collateral materials, these might be photos and documents that enhance the interview.
  - Add a note explaining the significance of each item.

- Return or properly store them.
- Transcribe the interview. This can be a long process.
  - Depending on your end project a verbatim transcript is easier to use than an audio recording.
  - Label the pages. On the first page label with the names of everyone involved with the interview, date, location. Place the surname of interviewee in the heading and number each page.
  - Ask the interviewee to make any corrections to the transcription.
- Closing the project
  - Send thank you note(s).
  - Make arrangement for a follow up interview if needed. Note the follow-up interview date and place on the original interview materials to tie the future interview(s) with the original interview.
  - Send copies of the interview and transcripts to the person(s) that were promised them.

### Sharing the interview

- Back to the beginning. Look back at the summary, your purpose, your audience, your end project.
- Several stories, lifetime, or generations
- Legacy project or one time use

### Sources

#### Books

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YouTube.com - there are many videos that can help you on this topic