

## **Collecting Stories: The Oral Interview in Research**

### **By Marsha MacDowell**

#### **Why do oral interviews for research?**

Histories of people, places, things, and events are constructed and reconstructed based on information--both tangible and intangible--that is available to those writing or telling the histories. Some histories can be deduced ONLY by examining tangible or physical evidence--such as printed texts, documents, photographs, the built environment, sound recordings, etc. Some histories are known ONLY through oral narratives. By recording oral narratives, the intangible histories become tangible. In addition to providing important primary source data for research, recorded oral narratives can be used for many other educational projects through radio programs, acoustical guides in exhibitions, and on the Internet.

#### **Do I need to collect oral histories for my particular research project?**

To figure out whether or not you need to collect oral histories for your research project, you will first need to know what topic in particular you want to investigate and what you plan to do with this information. Are you collecting data on a topic for general documentation purposes? Do you intend that the collected data will be used as a basis of description and analysis of a topic? Will you be strengthening knowledge about a particular topic? Do you intend to improve existing records of information on the topic or to create a new publication, educational program, or interpretive exhibition?

Remember, an oral narrative is research data that can only be collected from living individuals. If your interest is in doing a study of some aspect of a topic that pre-dates the experience of living individuals, then collecting oral stories would obviously not be your primary research methodology. You might encounter someone who can relate a story handed down to them about your topic of study, but it is unlikely that you would find many such individuals. On the other hand, if your topic of study is within the experience of living individuals, you might be able to find many individuals whose stories are connected to your topic and would be important to collect.

#### **Who should I interview?**

Once you have decided on the focus of your research topic and that oral interviews are needed for the project, then you can determine who you should interview. For instance, if your focus is on a very specific event or activity, you will want to interview those who were directly involved with the event or activity. Additional stories could be collected from those who were indirectly involved or indirectly affected.

#### **What happens when the stories or accounts of the same event or activity differ from one teller to the next?**

No story or account told by one person is going to be identical to an account of the same event or activity by the next person. A range of variables, including such ones as the teller's reason for telling the story, the relationship of interviewer to interviewee, the context in which the interview or story is told, etc. affect the rendition of the story told. Does this make one story or account more truthful or accurate than the next? NO, it simply means that the renditions are different and any interpretation of the oral accounts will need to factor in these variables. The more stories collected about a particular topic provides a

researcher to both identify information unique to the individual as well as common elements among multiple stories.

### **Does it make a difference who does the interview?**

The answer is both “yes” and “no.” Every time a story is told, the teller is consciously (or unconsciously) aware of to whom she/he is telling the story and why they are telling it. Just as you have determined a reason why you want to collect the story, the interviewee also reasons why they want to tell their story. This is not just a conversation between two people -- it is a joint, purposeful effort to record a narrative.

Age, sex, ethnicity, religion, and respective knowledge or experience with the interview topic are all factors which will have an impact on how the interviewee tells his/her story to the interviewer. Different people who interview the same person about the same topic will invariably get different versions of a story and sometimes entirely different stories. An interviewee might not share parts or all of a story if they do not feel comfortable, for whatever reason, with a person.

If the interviewer and the interviewee know each other well or perceive they share the same set of knowledge about the topic, the interviewer might leave out asking questions which seem too obvious. This might result, though, in important information not being recorded. Alternatively, certain types of questions that an interviewer might ask someone only because they are familiar with the person or the topic. Their mutual shared background becomes a plus.

The most important skills required of an interviewer are abilities to make the interviewee comfortable, both physically and psychologically; to be a good listener; and to come to the interview prepared. Good interviewers use culturally appropriate and friendly body language (i.e. nodding encouragement, not sitting with arms crossed in front of their chest, leaning slightly towards interviewee), maintain good eye contact, don't interrupt, use open-ended questions, and are aware of their facial expressions (i.e. smiling) to demonstrate that they are really attentive to and interested in what they are hearing.

### **Can interviews be done by telephone or over the Internet?**

The answer is yes. When there is not other way to record an interview that is critical to your research, an interview can be done by phone or over the Internet in a real-time format. However, both techniques lose the intimacy and spontaneity afforded by interviews done face-to-face. The interviewer and the interviewee do not have the benefit of observing or sensing facial or body gestures nor the benefit of being surrounded by the items (objects, photos, etc.) that can “jog” memories of the interviewee, asked about by the interviewer, or otherwise easily be referenced during the interview.

### **Where is the best place to conduct an interview? When is the best time to interview someone?**

The best time to interview someone is when it is convenient for them, and the best place to interview someone is where they feel comfortable and where there are good conditions for recording sound. Many times, the most comfortable place to conduct the interview is in familiar surroundings, such as a home or studio, with the interviewee seated in their favorite spot. The familiarity of the location will put an interviewer at ease and the objects in the setting might jog the telling of certain stories.

If the interview is to be tape-recorded, it is also important that the setting have few distractions or noises. Small sounds that you are barely aware of, such as the refrigerator

motor, ceiling fans, cars going by, side conversations, or computer hum are also picked up by the tape-recorder and can become loud and overpowering when played back. On the other hand, some background noises, such as birdcalls and clocks chiming, might lend a quality of authenticity and individuality that is desirable.

Usually it is preferable to interview only one person at a time; having more than one voice on a tape sometimes makes it difficult to determine who is talking. There are times, however, when having more than one person is advantageous; a story told by one person may jog the memory of another.

### **What questions should I ask?**

In most cases, people will not tell you what you want to know unless you ask the right questions, and, the questions you ask will depend on what you want to find out. Most good interviewers prepare for an interview by first making a list of the topics they want to know about, then preparing questions that will effectively elicit responses containing information about those topics. Questions should be phrased so they are open-ended; in other words so they will not require just a “yes” or “no” answer. Using phrases such as “tell me about” or “explain to me” are good prompts. Avoid complicated, multi-part questions. Maintain neutrality: don’t ask leading questions—those that indicate to your interviewee how you want her/him to respond.

Once you have your questions outlined, write them down in an order that seems logical. It is often advisable to group together like questions.

### **Making arrangements for the interview**

Keep in mind that the interviewee is doing you a favor by sharing their stories. Schedule the interview at a time convenient to the interviewee. If you don’t already know the person, make sure you tell them how you got their name. Explain the purpose of the project, why you want to interview them, what will happen to the tape recordings as well as any photographs you might take, and how and why you will be asking them to sign a release form [see “Ethics” section below]. Tell them how much time you think it will take. Encourage them to think about having on hand some items -- a scrapbook, photograph, or favorite memento -- that they think are important to the particular topic.

### **Conducting the interview**

Assuming you have done all of your homework, have arrived on time, have placed the recorder so that you can see the dials and change tapes without fuss, have placed the microphone so that it will pick up the voices you want on the tape, and explained the release form, you are now ready to record the interview.

Begin by putting a formal introduction on the tape. Include your name, the name of the person that you are interviewing, the day's date, the location of the interview, and why you are interviewing the person. For instance, “Today is January 16, 2002. This is Marit Dewhurst and I’m in East Lansing, Michigan at the home of my grandfather, Harlan MacDowell, and we are going to talk about his beekeeping.” There are two good reasons why this formal introduction is helpful: 1) Labels fall off of tapes and this introduction ensures that you and future generations will know what is on it; and 2) the act of informally recording your voice first may help to “break the ice.”

Then, turn to the first question on your list and keep the following in mind:

- Don't get flustered if information comes out in a different order than on your list. Information isn't necessarily arranged in a neat order in the mind. One memory leads to several others. Just write things down as best you can in the appropriate places.
- Use follow-up (or "probing") questions.
- Don't interrupt responses. If you think of a question while someone is talking, jot it down to ask later.
- Refrain from telling your story; you are there to record their story, not yours.
- Don't try to finish someone's sentence or to suggest a word they might seem to be searching for.
- If somebody is describing an item they are looking at (object, photo, etc.), encourage them to provide audio descriptions of visual items. For instance, if someone uses a gesture to indicate a measurement, ask him/her to state the length, as in "How long would you say that is?" If someone looking at a piece of fabric says, "I like this color," ask them to clarify, as in "How would you describe that color?"
- Don't hesitate to ask for clarification or repetition when you're confused. If it doesn't make sense the first time you hear it, it probably won't later.
- Don't be afraid of silence; sometimes individuals are "collecting their thoughts" and moving forward with another question would break their concentration.
- Even if you have solid reasons to disbelieve a story, maintain your neutrality and do not argue or refute what you hear; their story is their story. Do not, however, hesitate to clarify where they got their information; the source of information can be very important in later analyzing the story. Knowing the source is important to be able to distinguish an individual's singular experience from a custom widely shared by others.
- If you already know in advance that you will not be able to return for a follow-up interview, you can wind up the interview by asking if there is anything the informant would like to share before you end the session.
- If someone wants you to turn off the tape recorder for some reason, respect their wishes and do so. Ask to turn it back on later. If you are asked to erase a portion, do so.
- Keep track of the tape to make sure it does not run out at the end of your cassette. Take the time to stop the interview and to put in a new tape. It's very frustrating trying to reconstruct what was said while the tape was being switched.
- Keep an eye on the length of your visit. If you said you estimated it would take a certain amount of time and you appear to be exceeding it, ask if it is all right if you continue.

At the close of the interview, have the person sign the release form and thank them for their time. If they had materials (i.e. a photograph or pattern) they talked about and might be useful to copy, ask their permission to borrow it overnight or for a short period. If you have brought a camera, use this time to take a few photographs. If the interviewer has been especially helpful to you, you may want to consider giving her/him a copy of the tape. After your visit, send a thank-you note with any materials you promised to send and the optional gift tape. Assuming you plan to transcribe the tape-recorded interview, be sure to also let them know that a transcript for their approval will be sent at some time in the future.

### **How long should an interview last?**

There is no right or wrong length to an interview. Whether you are following a very structured sequence of questions, selecting from a menu of questions, or guiding the narrative session with questions that flow logically from the interviewee's answers, each interview will have its own appropriate length. It is not recommended that an interview will last more than an hour; often it will last a much shorter length of time. The important thing

is to remember that doing an interview is not a casual conversation, but demands concentration for both the interviewer and the interviewee. If the interviewee begins to wander away from the topic, tactfully bring them back “on track.” Keep in mind, though, that people are doing you a favor by sharing their time and information. If, of course, for any reason an interviewee seems tired, it is best just to gracefully terminate the interview and make arrangements to come back.

### **Ethics and Oral Interviews**

As an interviewer you are responsible to those you interview and you need to respect the privacy, dignity, and physical, psychological, and social welfare of the interviewee. There should be no exploitation of individual informant for personal gain. When there is a conflict of interest, the interviewee’s interests **MUST** come first. If somebody does not want all or a portion of his/her interview recorded, **DON’T** record it.

Participation in an oral history project must be voluntary. **NEVER SECRETELY RECORD AN INTERVIEW: ALWAYS** gain written permission. Interviewees should also be told in advance about the project and what will be the anticipated uses of the tapes. You are morally and legally obligated to do whatever you promise to do with the tapes.

Oral history interviews are subject to U.S. copyright law (1978) as well as libel and slander laws. Under copyright law, your interviewee legally owns his/her recorded stories and photographs taken of him/her. For public use of tapes/transcripts, both the interviewee and the interviewer must give written permission. Standardized release forms are useful; you may adapt release forms from other projects, or consult a lawyer and create your own form. [The latter may be advisable if your project has any sensitive aspects.] Most universities and research institutions in the United States **REQUIRE** that release forms be reviewed and approved by committees overseeing research projects involving human subjects; researchers should check with their institutions for information about procedures for gaining approval.

There are two schools of thought about when to have the interviewee sign the release form. One school recommends signing after the tape-recording “event” occurs; before that, there is nothing to donate. Once the interview is completed, the interviewer knows what is on the tape and will agree to its release. Others recommend that a general release should be signed before an interview series begins, and restrictions may be added by supplemental agreement. In either case, written consent must be given otherwise the use of the tapes are limited. Two copies of the release should be made; one for the interviewee, one for your files. You can discuss the consent form as a part of your tape-recorded interview so that consent also appears in audio/oral form but you must have the written form. For more information, see *Oral History and the Law* (Neuenschwander, 1993).

Many professional organizations recommend that the interviewer prepare a “Code of Ethics” statement that he/she sign and give to the interviewee. This statement serves as a reminder to both that rights and principles of conduct will be upheld. A good model for these statements can be found on these websites: American Folklore Society (<http://afsnets.org/ethics.htm>) and Oral History Association (<http://www.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/EvaluationGuidelines.html>).

### **What kind of equipment should I use?**

Whatever equipment you use, it is imperative that you become familiar with it before you make your first real tape. Read the instructions. Ask for a lesson from someone knowledgeable. Practice with a friend. You should know exactly what each button does and not take up valuable interview time figuring it out. Be especially sure to learn how to use the

volume level. One of the most common problems in recording voices is setting the volume level too low; when playing it back the tape has to be turned up so loud that you also hear hissing sounds of the recorder's motor and the tape itself.

Though any small recorder will do, the rule of thumb is to use the best equipment that is available to you. The better the equipment, the more likely that the recorded sound can be used later for radio broadcast programs, audio programs in exhibits, or on computer programs.

Of the analog style recorders, reel-to-reel recorders are still considered by some as the preferred equipment for sound recordings. They are, however, no longer easily accessible and, in fact, are now almost exclusively used in archives. Because they are no longer as common, reel-to-reel tapes are also harder to find and more expensive to use. High-quality DAT (Digital Audio Tape) recorders are also recommended for recording the spoken word; DAT tapes have a wider bandwidth than the analog tapes used by reel-to-reel or cassette recorders, and, in theory, are capable of capturing the entire range of human hearing. DAT recorders and tapes are also usually more expensive than analog cassette recorders and tapes and it is sometimes difficult to readily find local sources of DAT tapes. Another major drawback with DAT recorders is that recordings on DAT tapes begin to deteriorate much more quickly than those on analog tapes, therefore preservation of DAT recordings is a serious problem. Whichever recorder you use should be equipped with a digital tape counter, a battery indicator/recorder level, a jack for an external microphone, and the ability to use batteries or an electrical adapter.

DAT recorders require DAT tapes and reel-to-reel recorders require reel-to-reel tapes. If you use a cassette recorder choose C-60 (thirty minutes a side) or C-90 (forty-five minutes a side) cassettes. Longer tapes are available but they are thinner, easily stretched, break easily, and make poor archival copies. Only record on one side of the tape to avoid "print-through," which is the migration of the magnetic imprint to the other side of the tape and causes an unwanted "echo" effect on the recording. Name brand tapes with "high output" and "low noise" are preferable. Check to make sure tapes have screw casings (tiny screws holding the tape together, not heat sealed) in case the cassette needs to be taken apart to fix the tape.

The secret to a good recording largely depends on the microphone and the recording technique. External microphones of good quality should be used; built-in microphones generally are not of sufficient quality and fail to pinpoint the source of the recording. Sometimes external microphones can be attached to a boom or microphone stand. They should be directed towards the narrator--his/her voice should be clear and yours can be slightly muffled, but still audible. If possible, seat yourself next to, rather than across from, the interviewee so both voices record well. Clip-on (or lavalier) type microphones will also work and, when used in interviewing several people at once, may be joined by an inexpensive T-cord adapter. It is best not to try to hold the microphone by hand while interviewing; too often the microphone is forgotten and you end up either aiming it away from the speaker or putting it too close or too far from them, thus creating wide fluctuations in the level of sound. Some interviewers prefer to use a head phone to test the quality of the sound at least at the beginning the interview but also throughout the interview.

Most tape-recorders can be run on house current, via an adapter, or on battery. Alkaline batteries are preferable. Be sure to obtain extension cords to use when there is no electrical outlet near the place you will be interviewing. Duct tape is also handy to put over the cords to avoid anyone tripping.

A 35mm camera is also useful to take photographs of the interviewee to keep with the interview. Portrait shots of the interviewee as well as photos of tools, any demonstrated activities, and the place where the interview took place will provide additional documentation.

Depending on which equipment you use, you will need the following when you do the interview: the microphone(s), microphone stand, power cord, extension cord, take-up reel, batteries for recorder and microphone (including extras), headphones, cassettes, release forms, "Code of Ethics" form, note paper, pencil, duct tape, camera, and, if appropriate, a written statement about the project. Some individuals maintain a checklist to keep track of equipment and supplies. It is better to be over-prepared than to be without something you need.

### **Videotape**

Home video cassette recorders and cameras have opened up new possibilities for research. All of the suggestions and precautions for setting up audio-recorded interviews apply to videotape, with some additional concerns pertaining to visuals. Make sure that objects that appear in the background behind your interview will not appear inappropriate or distracting on the screen. You also need to be conscious of the effects of lighting and reflected light. Put the camera on a tripod and, unless you are a very skilled videographer, avoid zooming in and out or moving the camera from one spot to another. These movements often result in choppy and jarring footage.

Like digital audio recorders, there still is wide disagreement in the archival field regarding the use of digital cameras and video cameras for documentation purposes. Primary issues currently being debated include those relating to the appropriate system for labeling, archiving, and storing digital images.

### **Labeling and Logging a Tape**

Label each recorded tape as soon as you are through--right at the interview--so that you don't accidentally record over it or have to play several unlabeled tapes to find it. Even though it's a challenge to get information on a cassette label, include the names of the interviewees and interviewers, the date, the location, the length of the interview and how many tapes you used (1 hr., 20 minutes; tape 1 of 2; recorded on both sides). Be sure to punch the tabs out on top of the tape to avoid accidental erasure.

Whether or not you plan to give your collection to an archive, it is helpful to establish a system for assigning a unique identification number to every item in your collection so the items can be easily filed and retrieved. A chronological numbering system can be used for the whole collection or be combined with an alphabetical or other code for a specific project.

As soon as possible, play the interview back to make a written log (similar to the table of contents of a book) of the interview. Each time the topic of the interview changes, note the new subject. If the playback machine has a counter, include the counter number when the topic changed. Make notes on any confusing topics that were later clarified. The log will make it easy later to quickly locate topics on the tape.

### **Transcribing a Tape**

Transcribing tape-recorded interviews is an important part of the research process. It gives us a written record of the oral story and is especially important when the audio recording is of poor quality. And, with advances in computer technology, electronic

versions of transcripts can be digitized and, assuming all rights and permissions were secured, made broadly accessible for a variety of research and educational uses.

First of all, make a duplicate of your original tape, using every effort to make a faithful facsimile of the interviewee's voice. [NOTE: *It is helpful to use the same type of cassette for the dupe as was used for the original. Be sure to also make dupe at the same level of speed as the original*] Then, use only the duplicate for transcribing.

Transcribing basically consists of writing out exactly what the interviewee said, "word for word," without correcting grammar, usage, sentence construction, or trying to "interpret" what the person meant. While this might sound easy, transcribing is a time-consuming task governed by many rules. Useful printed resources are *Transcribing and Editing Oral History* (Baum, 1997) and *The Tape-recorded Interview* (Ives, 1980); a useful on-line resource, "Transcribing Style Guide," can be found at [http://www.baylor.edu/Oral\\_History/Styleguide.html](http://www.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Styleguide.html)

After you finish the transcription, you should send a copy to the interviewee so that he/she can correct any errors or fill in any missing information. When the interviewee sends back his/her corrected copy, be sure to keep the original and their corrected copy together.

### **Where and how should you store the materials you have collected?**

The collection you have made is a valuable resource for history. You have created a primary source document with a person who deserves to have her/his story told and you are responsible for the safeguarding of that document.

If you are going to keep them yourself, you should store them in closed boxes in a clean, dust-free, dry, cool area that has relatively stable humidity and temperature. Tape logs, transcripts, release forms, and any additional notes related to the interview should be kept in acid-free, archival folders. Cassette and reel-to-reel tapes should be played completely through every five years; some archivists even recommend rewinding annually.

Because the whole field of making and preserving sound is relatively new, archivists and sound preservation specialists are still unsure of what the shelf-life of certain media will be before significant deterioration occurs. Current preservation practices call for re-duplication of the original recording onto the best preservation media available. Some archivists recommend that original analog tapes should be copied onto 1.5 mil Mylar or polyester-backed, open-reel recording tape, a tape that is magnetically stable and has a long shelf life. The original and the copy can then be stored in different locations. For preservation purposes, tapes made on plastic film are also now being digitized and converted into digital audio files. Likewise, DAT tapes are being converted into digital audio files. While the originals will still be kept in the best storage conditions now known, the digitized version can be "migrated" into new electronic forms as they are developed.

If you want long-term care and protection of your collection and if you want to make your collection available to others, you will want to consider donating the collection to an institution that has an archive, preferably one specializing in the collections relating to your project. Contact the American Folklife Center/Library of Congress, a university library or archives, a state library or archives, a major museum, a state folk arts program, or one of the regional humanities centers for recommendations of where to deposit your collection.

*NOTE: A version of this article, specifically geared for quilt research, was prepared in 2001 by the author for the American Quilt Study Group, Lincoln, Nebraska.*

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American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)

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American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

<http://www.lcweb.loc.gov/folklife/>

Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

<http://www.folklife.si.edu/>

Institute for Oral History at Baylor University (offers an “Oral History Workshop on the Web”) [http://www.baylor.edu/Oral\\_History/Workshop\\_welcome.html](http://www.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Workshop_welcome.html)

H-OralHist (links to centers, methods, and projects, state and regional oral history associations, plus a popular discussion list for oral historians worldwide)

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/>

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