

Oral History Project

AAUW New York State is initiating a branch oral history project. As state historians we have prepared some materials designed to help. If your branch has a historian, a copy of this information is also being sent to her.

Long before the written word, oral history played an important role in the transmission of information from generation to generation. Much branch history is not written down – it exists only in the minds of the past officers, directors of projects, long time members and everyone associated with the organization. It is time to utilize these recollections and reminiscences in an oral history project for your branch. Each branch is encouraged to participate in order to preserve its memories and to give a new perspective to its branch history.

We have included the following:

- 1. Planning Steps for an Oral History Project**
- 2. Guidelines for Interviewing**
- 3. Suggested Forms:**
 - A. Interview Information Form**
 - B. Oral History Donor Form**

(These forms are paraphrased from examples found in Summer and Quinlan, The Oral History Manual, pp. 93 and 96. This book has other forms which can be used as needed. See complete imprint in the bibliography.)

- 4. Bibliography**

We hope your branch will participate. If you have any questions, feel free to contact us. Let us know about your progress for the oral history project.

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Planning Steps for an Oral History Project

Identify project personnel

Name the project (purpose clearly stated, realistic)

Develop a project budget (if necessary)

Establish record keeping procedures

Develop a publicity plan (branch, community)

Keep ethical and legal considerations in mind.

Train interviewers (interviewer well grounded in subject)

Determine equipment to use

Research background material on the subject(s) to be covered by the project

Develop a list of names and dates related to the project, themes or topics

List possible interview themes or topics

Identify people to be interviewed and themes and/or topics to be covered (a good cross section of people)

Develop a guide for the interview

Schedule the interview

Do the interview

Transcribe the oral interview to paper

Preserve the materials in the Branch archives after the interviewee has read them and given permission for this

The Planning Steps were taken from The Oral History Manual, by Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan. New York: AltaMira Press, 2002. p. 91.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERVIEWING

Before the Interview

1. Contact the narrator (interviewee) well before the time you would like to conduct the interview. Explain your plans and purposes and set a time for the interview. Keep notes on your first conversation. It may be desirable to follow the initial contact with a letter describing how the individual interviews fit as parts into the whole and listing four or five major topics to be covered. Your advance contacts will probably set the narrator to thinking about your interests, and you are likely to secure a better interview. More than courtesy is involved in laying the groundwork for interviews.
2. Familiarize yourself thoroughly with the relationship between the narrator and the project you are working on.
3. Outline the main points of interest for your interview. To avoid being trapped in a rigid formula, it is best not to write out specific questions but to jot down short phrases around which you can readily build questions. This use of notes will give the conversation a touch of spontaneity and will help set both the interviewer and the narrator at ease. If you choose to write out questions, be prepared to abandon them if the interview takes unexpected but productive turns.
4. If you plan to use a tape recorder, become thoroughly acquainted with its operation, especially the microphone, volume controls, and tape-changing procedures. Practice with someone before going to the interview. Also practice control of the tape so that you are adept at reserving a minute or so of blank tape before the recording of the interview starts; you may want to use this reserved portion of the tape to record information about the interview. Prepare a kit of materials that you will want to take with you to the interview: your notes and interview outline, pens and pencils, a notebook, an extension cord, and extra tapes. It makes sense to use the best equipment you can afford. Where possible, power the recorder with a line from an electrical outlet. If you rely on battery power, be sure to have extra batteries

Starting the Interview

1. Situate yourself and the narrator in comfortable positions. The recorder should be placed within your reach but where the narrator will not be too conscious of it. Try to avoid distractions, interruptions, and background noises from radios, television sets, or traffic.
2. Record a few minutes of conversation to make sure the equipment works before the interview begins.

3. Begin the interview by recording identifying information: name the interviewer, the narrator, the date, the place, and the subject of the interview.
4. Check the time in order not to exceed the length of the tape. Interviews should not normally be scheduled to last more than an hour or at most ninety minutes.

During the Interview

1. The interviewer should not dominate the conversation..
2. Avoid asking questions that can be answered with a simple Yes or No. Useful leads include: “What led up to...?” “Tell me about....” “What did you feel when...?” and “I would like to hear about....”
3. Ask only one question at a time. Keep your questions brief and to the point. Listen.
4. Do not let periods of silence fluster you; the narrator needs time to think.
5. Do not worry about a question that seems to be clumsily worded. A little fumbling by the interviewer may help to put the narrator at ease.
6. Do not interrupt a good story simply because the narrator has wandered from the planned framework of the questions. Try to find gentle ways and the appropriate time for pulling the conversation back on the track.
7. To help the narrator describe persons, ask about their appearance, then about their personality, character, and activities.
8. Remember that persons being interviewed are likely to give more interesting and more vigorous responses to questions or statements that imply uncertainty on your part than to ones that suggest you are merely seeking agreement. A phrase like “I’m not sure I understand” or “This can be confusing to someone who wasn’t there” may elicit useful information.
9. Try to establish where the narrator was at the time of the events being described as well as his or her role in them. Determine whether the narrator was a participant or a passive witness.
10. Do not take issue with the accounts given by the narrator even if you believe another version to be more accurate.

11. Be alert to points in the interview when special factual information is brought out. Take note of this information by writing it down. Asking the narrator to spell names is not at all inappropriate. Accuracy is more important than an uninterrupted interview.
12. Ask narrators to dig out photographs and other memory-prompting materials before the interview as a way of inviting them to think about the topics you want to discuss. If possible, make copies of these documents and include them with the tape when you deposit it in the archives.
13. At the end of the interview, repeat the identifying information: the interviewer, the narrator, the date, the place, and the subject of the interview.

After the Interview

1. Secure the written permission of the narrator (interviewee) to use the tape and transcription. (See the enclosed Oral History Donor Form.)
2. Record the identifying information in writing on a card to be placed in an interview file. On the same card list a summary of the major topics discussed, along with the point in the interview when discussion of these topics begins. This index, which requires the use of a tape-footage indicator or a stopwatch, makes the tape useful to researchers before a typed transcript becomes available. Such an index is important even when the researcher is also the interviewer. (See the enclosed Interview Information Form; this information may be also put on a card.)
3. Make a duplicate copy of the tape and store both copies in places where they can be preserved without damage, which means low humidity and temperature that avoids extremes of heat and cold. Take precautions against the tapes being erased.
4. Place a note with the tape indicating the date when it was recorded and requesting that it be played and rewound periodically, noting that the life of an unplayed tape may be less than twenty years, if that. In hot and dry conditions the tapes become brittle and crack, or they stick together, or a “print-through” or “voice-over” occurs, causing an echo on the tapes.
5. Make a typed transcription of the taped interview on acid free archival paper and store it in a safe place with temperature and humidity control.

Guidelines for Interviewing were taken from Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You, 2nd edition by David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, published in New York by AltaMira Press, 2000, pp. 107-112.

Oral History Donor Form

I _____ (name of interviewee), hereby give to the _____
_____ (branch name archives) as a donation this interview. Recorded on _____ (date). With this gift, I hereby transfer to the _____ (branch name archives) legal title and all property rights to the interview, including copyright.

I understand the interview may be made available for research and such public programming as _____ (branch name archives designated repository) may determine. This may include use of the interview in live or recorded programs for radio, television, cable, or any other items of electronic publishing that is not for profit. The interviews may not be broadcast, cablecast, or electronically published for commercial purposes without my written consent.

Interviewee's signature _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Date _____

Interviewer's signature _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Date _____

Interview Information Form

Interviewee's Name _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Interviewer _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Interviewer Background Information _____

Date of Interview _____

Place of Interview _____

Length of interview _____

Number of Cassettes or Discs _____

Oral History donor From Signed (Date) _____

Transcript Reviewed by Interviewee (Date) _____

Abstract of Interview:

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