

University of Missouri Extension

GG8, Reviewed October 1993

Oral History in Your Community

Carolynne M. Kieffer
Department of Sociology

Kieffer prepared this manuscript while a post-doctoral fellow at the Center for Aging Studies, University of Missouri-Kansas City.

The way of life that was characteristic of the earlier Midwest is rapidly disappearing. Many of our elders have vivid memories of those days; however, these memories are being lost every day. Many communities and groups are trying to preserve those memories while the elderly are still with us.

In the last decade or two, we have seen the development of a new appreciation of the past and of our cultural heritage. People search for "roots" and prepare genealogies to fulfill an apparent need for a sense of historical continuity.

Many community leaders have come to realize that the elderly are an excellent source of information about the past. Their individual lives span most of a century, and there is much to be gained from stories of their lives. The stories of these lives, told from the perspective of many years of living, have meaning now and in the future. If these stories can be recorded, your community can capture for posterity the historical facts and the human interest element of these lives (for example, feelings about growing up in that time and place). A collection of life accounts can be a valuable resource for understanding the history and special culture of your community.

What is oral history?

You may have noticed that a number of historical associations, women's groups, and other community groups recently have begun recording on tape the life stories of their older citizens. Historians have long been interested in learning about earlier times from older persons through a method known as oral history. Oral history refers to the tradition of recording facts of a historical nature relevant to a time and a particular setting.

The elderly as sources of local history

If your community has decided that it would like to record its own history, you have probably come to the conclusion that your older citizens are the best living sources of historical information. The elder citizens of any community are the only persons old enough to have experienced and to recall the past (for example, blacksmithing activities in your town at the turn of the century or the first time an automobile appeared in the community). They have also lived long enough to have a historical perspective on the past.

Many older citizens will be willing and honored to share their past with you in an oral history interview. If these persons are treated as sources of vital historical information, they will likely be glad to tell you about the past in your community. If an older person seems to have a good and reliable memory about the period you have identified, has a fair amount of self-confidence, and appears to enjoy talking about the past, she or he is probably a very good prospect for your interviewing endeavor.

Who should do oral history interviewing?

Let us suppose that your community or group has decided to gather information about its past through oral history

interviewing. We must also assume, then, that the interviewing and filing of this information will be done through responsible auspices. Local historical societies and volunteers who work with community facilities such as museums tend to be committed to doing responsible and sensitive interviewing.

The Extension Homemakers Association is another organization of persons who have done some historically related or documentary local work. Also, retired school teachers and university instructors have the intellectual skills and are "naturals" to help in a variety of ways. These various groups should be able to assist in obtaining oral history information if they are willing to move slowly and systematically toward their goals.

Be informed

The basic purpose for recording oral history is to learn about the past. However, the persons who plan to conduct an oral history program must take the time and effort to learn more about the historical context — the Twenties, the Depression, or the specifics of local government in that earlier period — before they begin the interviewing part of their work. Generally, the more background knowledge the interviewer possesses, the more relevant and useful will be the information coming from the oral history.

Develop your committees

Once your group has decided to record on tape the memories and insights of the elders of the community, you now face the challenge of identifying and developing your various leaders.

You will need:

- A group leader who should be able to work with other organizations such as library personnel. The leader should be able to tell your story, when appropriate, to the media or other groups. If your group is large enough, you may wish to divide these leadership responsibilities.
- One or more individuals who are willing to spend many hours interviewing elderly resource people and who are capable of remaining quiet and of being thoughtful and sensitive.
- One or more persons skilled in the use of equipment such as tape recorders to advise regarding the selection and maintenance of equipment as needed.
- One or more persons capable of assuming responsibility for storing and filing interview materials (e.g., tapes, transcripts, etc.) This individual should be able to direct the overall organization of the various papers and materials associated with the project.
- Two or more persons who are relatively well informed in the area of local history or national history and who are interested in learning about the past in your community. Ideally, all of those involved in your life history project should share an interest in the history of your locale. They should also be willing to use the library, the archives, etc., and to consult old newspapers and other documents of the period you are studying.

Volunteers who have not been associated with your group can serve a useful function in your oral history project. Choose volunteers wisely. Your group will probably need or want to orient them to the project and possibly provide some other training. Be certain that these volunteers will have the ability and the persistence to follow through once you have invested your time and effort in their training.

Choosing a respondent

Basically two approaches can be used in selecting respondents. The first approach to collecting oral history involves interviewing an older person because he or she is thought to have stories and other life experiences to share. Because Smith is age 89, has lived in your community all his life, and is an intelligent and thoughtful person, you may assume that his perspective on the history of your community is worth recording.

A second method involves identifying an issue about which your group would like to know more — information that is not handled with any degree of depth in your local library. At this point your group would go about identifying persons

in the community (or who had lived in the community during the period in question) who are knowledgeable about the issue you have chosen.

Either of these approaches may be appropriate at one time or another. The basic difference is that in the first approach you choose to interview Smith because he is 89 years old and is intelligent and thoughtful. In the latter approach your group may be interested in the development of the railroad in your community and you choose to interview Jones because he lived in the town when the railroad was introduced there and was one of the first employees of the railroad in those days.

In your early contacts with each potential resource person, you will need to be sensitive to how this individual feels about his or her expertise (with regard to the Depression, for example). You will need to get a sense of whether your potential narrator feels that he or she has something important to say in this regard. Most persons, if approached with respect, will be pleased to share with you and with posterity the experience of the past that is uniquely theirs.

Taping oral history

The tape recorder has made possible the recording of oral history interviews on a fairly large scale.

The life histories of many of the early statesmen of this country appear as biographies and in other forms. We know a good deal about their lives because of the diaries that many leading figures kept in those days and also because of the extensive personal correspondence that was carried on. The telephone and other modern conveniences may prevent us from developing permanent records for historians of the future to study. The tape recorder, however, is one tool that will — if we make use of it — provide a permanent record of the experiences and explanations of our now-older citizens.

Taping is undoubtedly the best method of recording the oral history interview as it unfolds. Your group may want to buy a moderately-priced recorder for your needs. The recorder should be small enough to be relatively inconspicuous. Buy a well-known brand of recorder, and choose high quality tapes with brand-names you recognize. Sixty-minute tapes (30 minutes per side) are easier to use and seem to cause fewer difficulties than longer ones.

Typing oral history

Eventually you may wish to transcribe your oral history tapes. It is expensive; however, once the interviews have been transcribed, the oral histories will be much easier to use. Transcribed pages should be placed in flexible or hardcover binders, depending on their volume.

Do not underestimate the effort and expense involved in transcribing tapes. Before you decide to introduce transcription into your oral history program you might wish to consult a reference work such as *Oral History: From Tape to Type* by Cullom Davis and associates.

As you interview

- Prepare by reading all you reasonably can about the historical period in question — about dominant political issues in the country at the time, about local issues such as the organization of labor unions in the community, and so on.
- You may wish to begin by asking your narrator to tell about himself or herself — the youthful years, early background, etc.
- You may wish to trace the life course of the respondent — roughly, or in more detail, as you see fit. There is much to learn from the story of another person's life; this is an added benefit to be derived from oral history interviews. Of course you will want to focus primarily upon the times and the social conditions in which your narrator lived. However, you will probably find it useful to learn about the life course and major life decisions of the respondent while focusing mainly on the times and conditions.
- Keep your questions brief and ask few of them. Several good orienting comments in your early conversations with the narrator will be much more helpful than interrupting his or her thoughts with numerous questions. Remember

that the oral history interview is not meant to be a dialogue. It is rather a narrative description — typically, but not necessarily, chronological — of individual and group experiences in a particular time and place. The interviewer is present only to direct the course of this description when and if necessary.

- Avoid questions that will produce a "yes" or "no" answer. It will take some practice to phrase your questions in a way that will produce a rich, "quality" response but, as you will see, it will be worth it.
- Become familiar with your tape recorder and pay minimal attention to the recording process during your interview. You will need to be alert to whether or not the machine is recording properly, but it is best not to "fuss" with the machine in the presence of your narrator. Remember, however, that the elderly may not speak with the same force as younger persons. Do not be afraid to ask a narrator to repeat something, especially if you think the tape recorder failed to catch some part of an account.
- Try to continue to establish the role of your narrator in the stories that she or he is telling. "Where were you when this was going on? What were other persons saying about the way the strike was being handled? Did their accounts differ in any way from the accounts that appeared in the newspapers?"
- Do not take issue with your narrator's account of an event. If you are aware of the fact that there are other accounts of this occurrence or turn-of-events, you might point this out gently without raising questions regarding the credibility of your narrator. Remember, there may be several different, perhaps equally valid accounts of an event: for the time being, it is the perspective of this narrator that should interest you most.
- Remember that there are ethical considerations that are the responsibility of the interviewer and of the transcriber (if you have one), and that these considerations should remain as important to you and your group as your interest in learning about the past. You will want to make every effort to help your narrator maintain his or her sense of self-respect and integrity. This is not normally a problem; most interviewees feel honored to learn that their own experience is valued highly enough to allow them to serve as a narrator. And they will develop a sense of pride about the contribution that they are making to your collection.
- Honor all agreements that you make with your narrator but, on the other hand, make few agreements. You may agree to provide a copy of the tape recording or, more typically, of the transcription of your interview for the narrator or his or her children. If you have agreed to provide these materials or other assistance, you are of course obligated to make them available.
- Remember that the work done by your group and its members reflects on your entire program and upon the oral history endeavors of others who do this work throughout the country. If you anger your narrators, if you do not honor your commitments to them, or if for whatever reason you engender hostility in your community, you are endangering the future of the overall oral-historical endeavor.

Questions interviewers may find useful

- Let's begin with the beginning. You were born in what year? Where?
- Was your family living on a farm, in a village or in town?
- Which child were you? (first, only, etc.)
- If you would think back to those early days as you were growing up, what are some of your earliest memories of the town?
- What did your father do? Can you give me a few details on his work? What are your earliest memories of him?
- What are some of your other recollections of your father when you were a child, up to, say, 10 years old?
- Now, could you tell me about your mother and her role within the home?
- Let's look at you, as you look at yourself, as a child growing up. In what ways do you think you might have been different from your brothers and sisters or from other children that you knew well?
- What are your memories about the War (or the Depression, or another event of concern to your oral history project)?
- What was this town like, as you remember it, during the Depression?
- How did it come to pass that the railroad was brought (or was not brought) to our town?
- As you think back to that period, who do you feel was the person most responsible for the decision to (say) incorporate?

References

- *The Oral History Review*. An annual publication of the Oral History Association. North Texas State University, P.O. Box 13734, NTSU Station, Denton, Texas 76203.
- Baum, Willa. *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. Second edition, revised. Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1974.
- Daniel, Lois. *How to Write Your Own Life Story*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1980.
- Davis, Cullom, Kathryn Back, and Kay MacLean *Oral History: From Tape to Type*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1977.
- Meckler, Alan, and Ruth McMullin (Eds.). *Oral History Collections*. New York: Bowker, 1975.

The Missouri Gerontology Institute develops and coordinates instruction, research and extension activities on aging among the university campuses (Columbia, Kansas City, Rolla and St. Louis), Lincoln University and MU Extension.

Order publications online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/shop/> or call toll-free 800-292-0969.



■ Issued in furtherance of the Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Director, Cooperative Extension, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211
■ an equal opportunity/ADA institution ■ 573-882-7216 ■ extension.missouri.edu