



Williamson County Historical Commission

Oral History Handbook

“The real record of history is found in the lives of the ordinary people who lived it.” – Texas Historical Commission

ORAL HISTORY DEFINITIONS, & RATIONALE

The study of history encompasses many aspects of research. Traditional methods gather factual data such as dates, places and names. These rely on written records from the legal system, news articles, and other official sources. These sources are the product and often a reflection of the mores of their times. Therefore, to fully understand not only the sequence of events (the what and when) more information is needed to answer what it meant to the individuals of the time (the why). Oral histories, taken as a whole, can provide this added dimension. In addition, oral history projects can correct stereotypical images, verify events which cannot be found through traditional methods and preserve aspects of little known or vanishing ways of life. Oral histories emphasize personal experiences. By preserving and sharing them, knowledge and understanding are passed from one generation to the next, much in the way that storytelling has accomplished through the ages.

Technically, *oral history* consists of an audio or video recording that preserves the historical information obtained through the interview of a person. The interview may focus on that person's life history or an eyewitness account of a certain past event or experience.

There are two main differences that distinguish oral histories from interviews: 1) subjectivity which allows the interviewer to ask not only "what happened" but also ask "how did what happened make you feel."

(2) This allows the formation of a connection between the two so that the interviewee is encouraged to interpret and analyze their personal experiences from their own point of view using their own words.

The Oral History Association sets the principles & standards for oral history practice. These guidelines outline ethical behavior toward interviewees, the public and the profession. Guidelines can be found at <http://.dickinson.edu/oha/pub.eg.html>. In addition to ethical standards, there are some legal aspects that must be considered. These include: 1) copyright law which protects fair use of the interview in reproduction, distribution, display, etc. and 2) the interviewer should be aware of possible violations of libel and slander laws. Legal questions should be addressed before the interview ever begins through the signing of interview agreement forms. No interview is performed without a signed legal agreement.

The audio recordings that are the result of oral history interviews can provide listeners with the means to better understand historic events expressed through personalized accounts. Preserving and protecting the recorded interviews and making them available for study is also required to meet the original purpose of the creating & maintaining of *oral history*. Often called archiving, it is a vital aspect of the process. Without a method and means to adequately protect the interview and provide access for future historians, the information attained is meaningless.

TASKS TO BE COMPLETED BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Topics, goals, and scope of oral history projects are to be determined by the WCHC. Suggested interviewees must be approved by the WCHC.

Research the person & topic as much as possible before meeting, establish rapport from the beginning.

- A pre-interview bio is helpful. Establish a general outline for the interview.
- Write out the outline with open ended questions for discussion
- Probe for details, seek definitions & clarifications.
- Restate or summarize often.
- Avoid leading questions
- Use keywords & phrases

Equipment: Use a digital voice recorder, either your own or check one out from the Museum.

- Test that the recorder is in working order prior to the scheduled interview as well as at the beginning of the interview.
- Test a camera if needed.

Release form: **The WCHC Interviewer/Interviewee Release Oral History Deed of Gift Agreement** must be signed by both the interviewer and interviewee – **no exceptions.**

- When possible deliver the form prior to the interview to allow the individual and/or family members to review.

Schedule the interview: Allow the interviewee to select the time and place for the interview.

- A home is a good place because the person is usually comfortable there.
- Any quiet place with few distractions is good.
- Allow plenty of time for setting up.
- A study carrel or a small conference room work well.
- Be sure that the setting will contribute to relaxed, free-flowing conversation.
- Include a partner or family member if it is determined they would be helpful.
- Explain the purpose of the interview and the relevance of the project.
- The day before the interview, call the interviewee to remind him or her about your appointment.

THE INTERVIEW

SETTING UP

When you first arrive at the interview site, create a relaxed pleasant atmosphere for the setting. Discuss the relevance of the project & emphasize the importance of interviewee's role in it. Now is a good time to take a photo of the subject for the file.

- If not previously delivered, explain the **Release Form**, have it signed and file it. **No Release Form, No Interview, No Exceptions!**
- Be flexible enough with your equipment so that the subject can sit where they will be most comfortable.
- Plan to limit the interview talk time to 45-60 minutes to reduce the possibility of interview fatigue. Another interview can be scheduled if more time is needed.
- Briefly retest your recorder.
- Begin the recording, then ignore the machine & devote attention on the interview.
- Initiate every interview with the following script:
The Williamson County Historical Commission is sponsoring this interview as part of the Williamson County Oral History Project. It is being conducted by _____ (interviewer's full name & title). Today's date is _____. The interviewee is _____ (full name & title). This is the _____ (1st, 2nd) interview with _____ (shortened name). The interview is taking place at _____ (full address).

THE DEED

Begin with simple warm-up questions. These help the subject to relax & enjoy the session. For example, ask where they were born & raised. Listen attentively, encourage storytelling, and let the interviewee set the pace.

- You can bring your outline with you but **do not** read from it or let it restrict the interview. Allow time for responses to run their course.
- Ask open-ended questions which encourage a more flexible & natural conversation.
- Avoid leading questions as they may introduce your own bias.
- Ask for concrete illustrations & examples, definitions & clarifications.
- Restate or summarize answers to gain better understanding.
- Remind the interviewee to include details such as dates & places.
- Be prepared to stray off topic of your outline. It may introduce a new line of interest.
- Gently return the speaker back to the subject when necessary.
- Do not be afraid of silence.
- People remember things in different ways. You may have to use several different approaches for complete answers. Try rephrasing the questions.
- Exhibit patience to allow thoughts to develop.

IN CONCLUSION

Most interviews seem to run their course. After about an hour the person is generally tired of talking. If more time is needed or if a different topic needs to be addressed, schedule another interview for another time.

- Before turning off the recorder ask one last important question: “Is there anything I haven’t asked you that I should know or that you wish to include?” This allows the interviewee an opportunity to add something not previously covered. It may also lead to information of others who might be good interview candidates. Or who may have additional information including but not limited to a different aspect of the topic under discussion.
- Be sure to express your appreciation for the contribution that the interviewee has made. Often you will find that you have learned a great deal more than you expected and are enriched by the experience.
- Arrange for a copy of the interview and the photo to be sent to the interviewee.
- It is a thoughtful gesture to send a written “Thank You” note about a week after the interview.

TASKS TO BE COMPLETED AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Once the interview is completed, the work of preservation begins. This is where the true value of the recorded oral history is established. That is to say that its importance lies in how the information is used and made accessible for research. The Williamson County Historical Commission is partnered with the Williamson Museum to have our oral history files archived.

- **The entire file must stay together at all times throughout the entire process. A separate copy (thumb drive) will be sent to the transcriber.**
- The file containing the **Release Form, the photograph, and the Recorder/thumb drive** are delivered to the oral history file at The Williamson Museum after the interview is complete. This will start the entry in the Oral History notebook. The interviewer notifies the WCHC Chair of the delivery.
- The Williamson Museum will download the interview into an MP3 file for transcription and will store the file in the Oral History Notebook.
- The Oral History Chair arranges for transcription of the recording. The transcript shall be in a Word format and the interviewee picture as a jpeg. Completed transcription should be emailed to The Williamson Museum for inclusion in the oral history files.

- The WCHC Oral History Chair is responsible for return of the recorder when the transcription is complete. Copies of the transcription and photographs are then forwarded to the interviewer, who reviews it with the interviewee. Any corrections or changes are returned to the Oral History Chair.
- The corrected transcription (**.doc**) and photographs (**.jpeg**) plus a copy of the audio file (**.mp3**), if available, are sent by the Oral History Chair to the WCHC website Chair and the Williamson Museum **by email**. This will complete the file in the Oral History notebook.
- The Website Chairperson is responsible for assuring that the complete interview and a summary are integrated onto the current website.
- The **complete file** must include release form, all photographs, any audio copies of the recording and the corrected transcript of the recording.
- **The entire file must stay together at all times throughout the entire process.**

ORAL HISTORY USE & STORAGE POLICY

For oral history interviews and short story recordings to be considered official WCHC undertakings, interviewees and speakers must sign the most recent WCHC Oral History Release Form and clearly understand that the information will be available to the public on the WCHC website and in the WCHC archives.

Oral history recordings, photos, transcriptions and summaries in the WCHC archives and posted on the WCHC website are the property of Williamson County Historical Commission. They can be accessed by the public, but cannot be reproduced without the expressed, written permission of the WCHC Chair.

Original copies of Oral History interview and story materials are to be kept together in the WCHC archives at the Williamson Museum in Georgetown. These items are not to be removed from the museum.

Backup for this information is essential and will include posting on the WCHC website, loading on the WCHC laptop/external drive and the keeping of transfer CDs and thumb drives in the oral history archives at the museum.

REFERENCES

1. Baylor University Institute for Oral History.
<http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/>
Introductory and advanced instruction in the Workshop on the Web
2. Oral History Association.
<http://www.oralhistory.org>
News on annual conferences, resources on best practices, information on digital technology, links to online *Oral History Review*
3. Baylor University Institute for Oral History.
Study Guide: A Quick Reference for Editing Oral History Transcripts, 2018.
4. Texas Historical Commission.
Fundamentals of Oral History Texas Preservation Guidelines. 1992.

