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Oral History Workshop

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Oral History

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This presentation was originally produced by Randy Williams for an oral history workshop sponsored by the Utah State Historical Records Advisory Board & Utah State University, held May 2010 at Utah State University. The slides are prompts for teaching and discussion, thus not all workshop information is conveyed in this PowerPoint. The author recommends engaging the hyperlinked media to gain deeper insights into oral history best practices and ethics. The May 2010 workshop was made possible through generous funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Presentation revised and updated November 2016 by Randy Williams.
What is oral history?

Oral history (fieldwork, cultural documentation) is a method of recording the memory and personal commentary from knowledgeable individuals (often called tradition bearers and community scholars) in order to document a historical event, group, tradition, occupation, avocation, attitude, etc.
A face to history

Oral history adds flesh and blood to the bones of history.

Alex, USU Latino/a Voices Project:

Well when my brother got deported, inside I was sad and scared for my brother, worrying about him; but outside, I didn’t want anybody to know I was sad, so I just had a fake smile on my face everyday. So like I made soccer team, and it was kind of hard because I was thinking about my brother at the same time, and I had to focus on soccer; it was kind of hard.

Oral historian Donald Ritchie states:

*Oral history derives its value not from resisting the unexpected, but from relishing it. By adding an ever wider range of voices to the story, oral history does not simplify the historical narrative but makes it more complex—and more interesting.*

The ethical responsibilities of professional researchers to the individuals and communities who collaborate with them in the course of research projects are central concerns for a number of scholarly organizations.

From the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress Cultural Documentation Guidelines

Researchers must put the needs of project participants (interviewees) ahead of research needs. Researchers must know and employ ethical best practices in all aspects of the work: plan, interview, transcription, and deposit. Researchers must work to mitigate uneven positions of power.

Positions and principles:
- American Folklore Society Ethics and Human Subjects
- American Anthropological Association
- Society of American Archivists
- International Council of Museums
- Oral History Association
Is memory accurate?

Memories and personal reflections are vital to oral history projects. However, for most of us, some parts of our past are very memorable while other parts not as much. Therefore, many voices (interviews) are vital for any oral history effort. As mosaics are made up of many tiles which together reveal the larger picture, each voice in an oral history project helps elucidate the fuller scope of the project topic. With this in mind, at USU our oral history efforts include the voices of many individuals in an attempt to illuminate as much of a topic as possible. This allows researchers the ability to review, compare, and contrast data in an attempt to further understand human history from an “insider’s perspective.”

During the 2009-12 Ranch Family Documentation Project we interviewed 78 ranchers from four Intermountain West counties in an attempt to better understand the experiences and complexities of ranching in the 21st Century. Each voice added an important perspective.

Why oral history?

When archived and made available, oral histories add important historical and cultural documentation to repositories. At Utah State University we have an active cultural documentation program that works to enhance our holdings and enrich local, state, and national history for present and future researchers. We often work with colleagues in the USU Folklore Program to give students opportunities to conduct fieldwork, including the Library of Congress/USU Field School.

The 2009-12 USU Ranch Family Documentation Project grew out of discussions with local Nevada rancher C. Gardner and included Rosa Thornley, a graduate student fieldworker. The project built upon two USU Collections: Utah Construction Company/Bowman photo collection (which documents daily ranch life, 1890-1945) and the 1985-6 Grouse Creek Cultural Survey conducted by a robust ethnographic team including the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and Utah State University, and others.
Partnerships

Oral history projects can be the first exposure to archives for some communities that are traditionally underrepresented in archives and under heard in public discourse. At USU we aim to represent as many communities (voices) as possible. Thus, building strong collections comes from building strong community connections.

At USU we try to partner with community scholars and agencies to conduct our documentation projects. At present (2016) we are embarking on a year-long project to document the voices of the Cache Valley Drug Court: participants, family members, and professionals. This project was the idea of a community scholar and drug court graduate; this young man and a Cache Valley Drug Court committee member are on the project planning committee.

Cache Valley Utah Drug Court
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
SEEKING PARTICIPANTS

If you are interested or would like more information, call 435-797-3493
or visit archives.usu.edu/folklo/drugcourt.php

Cache Valley Drug Court oral history project information, includes release informed consent letter, questions, and release form.
Who conducts oral histories?

Alta, Marion (daughter), and Austin Fife, with Recordio recording device and camping trailer on a 1954 fieldwork trip to Moab, Utah. The Fifes were documenting Mormon folklore. The Fifes’ fieldwork is housed at USU Special Collections & Archives.

- Families
- Community organizations
- American Indian tribes
- Folklorists
- Anthropologists
- Historians
- Sociologists
- Journalists
- Medical researchers
- Students
- And others

Some uses of oral histories

- Community history
- Family history
- Preservation/Documentation
  - Archival records
- Preserve language
- Exhibitions
- Cultural understanding
- Education analysis
- Medical discoveries
- Gain new perspectives on old topics

Except perhaps medical discoveries, all the uses noted above were part of the 2015 LOC/USU Field School for Cultural Documentation.
Northern Utah Speaks

NUS is an aggregate of the rich oral history collections housed at USU Special Collections and Archives.
Northern Utah Speaks

• Mission
  – Identify and conduct oral history projects in areas critical to the people, environment, and history of Northern Utah and subject interests of Utah State University
  – Make oral histories available
  – Teach oral history workshops and best practices
Oral History How-to: Planning

- Best practices
  - Oral History Association
  - American Folklore Society
  - American Folklife Center, Library of Congress
- Ethics (Barre Toelken)
- Work with community scholars
  - From concept through completion, include representatives from the group to be documented on the executive team
- Research your topic thoroughly
- Project plan
  - Goals and desired outcomes
    - This is added to letter of information, see below
  - Procedures: how you will do the work
    - This is also added to letter
  - Institutional Review Board
    - Many oral history efforts receive exempt status, but you still must create a protocol
- Question preparation
  - Work with community scholars to create questions
- Forms
  - Release
  - Informed consent/Letter of Information
  - Questions (questions in letter of info)
- Equipment know-how and parts
  - Learn to use your equipment before interview!
    - I use a Marantz Professional 660 and Shure omnidirectional mic; if at all possible, do not use an internal microphone

Oral History How-to: Interview set up

• **Initial contact with interviewee**
  – Work with a community scholar (often called “gatekeepers”) to identify people to interview
  – With training, community scholar(s) make excellent interviewers
  – Once, you have a list of potential interviewees, make initial contact, this can be done by phone, letter, or email (I prefer phone)
    • While on the phone, you may want to do a simple intake form for basic information

• **Set up interview**
  – **Safety first for both interviewee and interviewer**
  – Make sure your interview is at a convenient and **safe space**
  – Never interview alone
    • It is great to have a recordist or photographer
  – Tell someone where you are going
  – Mail or email forms (before interview)

• **Be on-time**
  – Call if going to be late

• **Physical proximity**
  – Be sensitive to community and cultural norms

• **Room configuration**
  – I like to interview kitty-corner to interviewee (as photo depicts)

*Collecting Memories: Oral Histories of American Folklorists* is a joint project of USU and the American Folklore Society.
Oral History How-to: Beginning the interview

- **Equipment setup**
  - Recorder, mic, headphones, camera, and cords, if needed
  - During this time I ask the interviewee to (re)review the release form

- **Microphone placement (see image)**
  - Place mic close to interviewee but make sure you are heard
  - If you are using a lavalier microphone do not place mic under chin, too far down torso, or on collar, as it makes for intermittent, poor sound
  - If possible, ask interviewee to remove any jewelry that may impeded audio

- **Sound Check**
  - Do a quick test of sound
  - Explain that you will check sound levels and equipment during interview, but that you are paying attention
  - Work to mitigate for external noise: phones, outside noises, etc., but don’t stress yourself or interviewee: a little noise is better than stressed people

- **Tag interview**
  - Date, your name, interviewee(s) name, project title, where you are at, who is also present, etc.

- **Notes (log): I explain that I will be taking notes and occasionally**
  - Who was there
  - Your thoughts and impressions
  - Outside noises or activities
  - Follow-up questions
  - Promises you make to interviewee: be sure to fulfil

Oral History How-to: The interview

- **Interview styles**
  - Avoid questions that solicit “yes” or “no” answers
  - Avoid leading questions, I prefer direct questions
    - **Direct**: Why did you move to Europe?
    - **Indirect**: I was wondering why you moved to Europe?
    - **Leading (avoid)**:
      - Example leading: *How much will prices go up next year?*
      - Example Non-leading: *Do you think prices will go up next year?*
  - Your personal experiences/attitudes may be tempting to add, but remember this interview is not about you
    - **Check your ego and opinions at the door**

- **Verbal/non-verbal responses**
  - Try to omit “um hums,” “I see,” “okay,” etc.
  - Use your eyes, face (smile), body language to encourage
  - You can also convey boredom with your body
    - Excessive checking clock, folded arms, slouching

- **Reading interviewee’s facial & body expressions**
  - If someone seems uncomfortable, they probably are
    - You may need to stop a line of questioning or even stop interview and discuss

- **Allow for silences in interview**
  - Inner dialog
  - Difficult memories
  - Working to recall specifics

- **Visual elements: be sure to explain on tape**
  - Photos, maps, objects, etc.

- **Be aware of sensitive topics**
- **NEVER secretly record, especially if someone asks you to turn the recorder off**
Oral History How-to: Conclude interview

- At the conclusions of the interview, on recording
  - Thank interviewee
  - Ask for signed release
- Stop machine
- If appropriate/approved, photograph
  - Interviewee/Interview session (if you have a photographer)
  - Surroundings
  - Home
- Explain what will happen next:
  - Transcription of interview
  - Transcript will be sent to them to review
  - Edits to transcript per interviewee desires
  - Final interview transcript to interviewee
  - Deposit final interview transcript, audio, and any photos or associated materials to repository

Oral History How-to: After interview

- Create log for your records
  - How it went
  - Problems
  - Follow-up questions (if needed)
- Send thank you letter/email
  - Explain when they can expect to see a draft of the transcript for review
- Download interview audio (wav file) and save
- **Transcribe interview**
  - If you are transcribing the interview yourself allow 6-10 hours per one hour of recording
  - If sending interview to a transcriptionist, make sure they are reputable (ethical)
- Send transcript to interviewee for vetting (review)
  - Make the suggested edits to transcript
- If necessary, schedule a follow-up interview
- Send a copy of final transcript (and audio if promised) to interviewee
- Deposit interview materials at reputable repository

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**RANCH FAMILY ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTION COVER SHEET**

Interviewer: Marge Prunty and Gary Prunty  
Place of Interview: Elko, Nevada  
Date of Interview: 28 January 2019  
Interviewer: Randy Williams  
Recorder: Randy Williams  
Recording Equipment: Radio Shack Cassette Recorder CTR-122, with RS Omnidirectional microphone: ATR15s  
Transcription Equipment: Power Player Transcription Software, Executive Communication Systems with foot pedal  
Transcribed by: Swarn Gross  
Transcript Proofed by: Randy Williams (4/10/2010)  

**Brief Description of Contents:** Marge Prunty talks about growing up on a ranch, marrying a rancher, establishing their own ranch, and raising their family on a ranch. She also talks about the other methods of supplemental income, including teaching school, riding rodeo stock, hunting guides and branding calves.

**References:**  
RW = Randy Williams (Interviewer)  
MP = Marge Prunty  
GP = Gary Prunty

**NOTE:** Marge’s granddaughter Becky Prunty Lisle and her son Tyler Jack Lisle are also in the house during the interview. Interjections during pauses or transitions in dialogue such as “uh” and starts and stops in conversations are not included in transcript. All additions to transcript are noted with brackets.

**TAPE TRANSCRIPTION**

[**Tape 1 of 2:** A]  

RW: [Beginning announcement starts before mid sentence] I put on the tape that we are here in Marge Prunty’s townhouse, in Elko; the 28th of January, 2010 — if you can believe it. Marge, do you want to tell us your full name and your birth date?  

MP:
Conclusion

Excellent oral history endeavors begin with thoughtful preparation, impeccable ethics, and community partners. When engaging in this work, it is imperative to be honest and principled: no trespassing on culture. To this end, I recommend that you find an expert mentor and work with insightful community partners.

I appreciate my incredible and ethical mentors: folklorists William A. “Bert” Wilson, J. Barre Toelken, and Steve Siporin. As well, I’ve learned much from peers Carol Edison, Craig Miller, Elaine Thatcher, Andrea Graham, Lisa Duskin-Goede, Lisa Gabbert, and Guha Shankar. I extend thanks and sincere appreciation to the amazing community partners I’ve had the privilege to work with and learn from, including Col. Jeffrey Bateman, Elisaída Méndez, Jorge Rodas, Eduardo Ortiz, Maria Luisa Spicer-Escalante, Barbara Middleton, Cliff Gardner, Reed Murray, Gene Shawcroft, Chit Moe, Har Be Bar, Berhane Debasai Abraha, Andrew Dupree, and Brock Alder.
Resources

Webography

- AFS Position Statement on Research with Human Subjects
- Cultural Documentation Guidelines, American Folklife Center
  - Participant Observation
  - Suggested Guidelines for Recorded Interviews
- Fieldwork Methodology: Introduction (Bryn Mawr, Haverford, Swarthmore Colleges)
- Oral History Association
- Principles of Fieldwork and Archiving, Folklore Fellows
- Veterans History Project

Bibliography

Doing Oral History

Fieldwork
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Living with Stories: Telling, re-telling, and remembering
William Schneider, editor (Utah State University Press, 2008)

People Studying People: The human element in fieldwork

So They Understand: Cultural issues in oral history
William Schneider (Utah State University Press, 2002)

“The Politics of transcription”
Mary Bucholz (Journal of Pragmatics, 2 October 1998; revised version 15 August 1999)

The Tape Recorded Interview
Edward Ives (University of Tennessee Press, 1995)

The World Observed: Reflections on the fieldwork process
Bruce Jackson & Edward D. Ives, editors (University of Illinois Press, 1996)
Questions

scweb@usu.edu

R. Williams interviewing B. Maupin, 27 January 2010, for Ranch Family Documentation Project. Dan Davis photographer. Used with permission.