

ORAL HISTORY REVIEW

Historians have been recording first-hand accounts since antiquity. In fact, Herodotus, the father of history, encouraged veterans of the Persian Wars to share their memories with him for the benefit of posterity. In a more recent era, Lyman Draper and John D. Shane interviewed pioneers of the Old West about life on the frontier. Today few 20th century historians would attempt to write modern history without conducting oral interviews with participants of events and periods. Now it is your turn to “collect” history.

Conduct an interview of an hour or so with an individual who has interesting recollections about life in Kentucky. You may wish to find out about the depression years, WWII, homefront, the civil rights movement, labor problems, local politics, coal mine, growing up “long ago”, or information your parents, grandparents, neighbors, ect., can relate.

Once you have selected the subject and person to be interviewed, give careful thought to the interview. Read about the topic and write down the questions you want to ask. Be sure that your tape recorder is in good working order. Use a standard-size tape; the “itty-bitty” size is not acceptable. Tell the person you are interviewing that the tape will be placed in the History Department (and ultimately the Kentucky Library) for the use of others interested in the topic. Have the release form signed.

From the information you acquire, write a 3-5 page narrative on the materials you obtained. Also transcribe at least 15 minutes of the tape. If at all possible, include a picture of the person interviewed. [Places like Kinko’s can copy photographs.]

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS AND INTERVIEWERS

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW:

1. Be sure that your equipment is in good working order:
 - A. Know how to operate your equipment. Try out the recorder and microphone and/or video camera.
 - B. Check your batteries (carry extra batteries).
 - C. If using electricity, carry a long extension cord so that you can use a convenient outlet.
 - D. Check your tapes and carry along an extra one.
2. Set up a time that is convenient for the person who is being interviewed.
3. Research your topics before the interview; be as knowledgeable as possible.
4. Make a list of questions that you particularly want to ask.

THE INTERVIEW

1. Be on time! The interviewee is doing you a favor.
2. Make sure the interviewee is comfortable and seated in a familiar chair or in a customary part of the house.
 - A. If using a tape recorder place it between you and the person you are interviewing so both can be heard on the tape. If there is a problem it is more important that the interviewee's voice be the strongest on the tape.
(Sometimes it helps to place a towel under the tape recorder so that vibrations are less likely to be picked up by machine.)
3. Do not start the interview immediately but sit and visit with subject until he/she is at ease with you and your project. Make sure that he/she understands why you are there, the reason for the interview, and that there is an information release form.
4. If possible, do the interview with no one else present in the room.
5. If a TV or radio is on, ask that it be turned off until the interview is over. Noisy fans, appliances, and traffic noises can interfere with a clear interview. Be aware of any noises or outside distractions that can be avoided. The tape can be turned off if the interviewee has to answer the telephone. BUT do not forget to turn it back on when the interview resumes.

THE INTERVIEW

1. Begin the interview by saying the following:

This is an interview with [name of interviewee] of town and state on [month, day, year]. The interviewer is [your name].
2. Begin the interview with questions the interviewee can easily answer. This approach will make the interviewee feel more at ease and will give the interviewer background information. Possible questions might be:
 - A. When were you born?

- B. Where were you born?
 - C. Who were your parents?
 - D. Do you know where your parents were born?
 - E. Do you know your grandparents' names? Birthplaces?
 - F. What were your parents and grandparents occupations?
 - G. Where did you grow up?
 - H. Where did you go to school? [If you state the question in this manner those who went to college will tell you so, and those who did not will not be embarrassed.]
3. If you fail to understand something you are told, be sure to say you do not understand. Ask for further information if necessary.
 4. If you understand what you have been told by the interviewee but realize that someone else might not understand the term, ask for an explanation. Some examples:
 - A. "My father made a clothes press," A press is another word for a freestanding clothes closet.
 - B. "My mother made a counterpane." Counterpane is another name for a coverlet or bedspread.
 - C. "I used a singletree harrow." A singletree harrow is a piece of farm machinery.
 - D. "Papa always bought guanana in the spring." Guanana is fertilizer.
 5. When you have asked all the questions that you have on your list, ask the interviewee if there is anything else that he/she would like to add or any comments that they would like to have preserved for posterity. You may get some really thoughtful insights on life, work, and the things that are considered important. Once you have finished with the interview, be sure to say thank you to the interviewee for the information and the time.
 6. Be sure to get the release form signed.
 7. Gather up everything you brought.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

1. Write down your impressions of the interview. What went well? What did not? how can you improve?
2. You should promptly write a thank you note and send it. In addition to a verbal thank you is always a sign of courtesy. Good manners may make it easier for you, or someone else, to obtain a second interview with the person or with someone else in the same family or community.

HINTS FOR OBTAINING A GOOD INTERVIEW:

1. Try to limit your interview to one hour. You will be tired after one hour and so will the interviewee. With the preliminaries and the leave taking, you will probably spent one and one half hours with the interviewee.
2. Never interrupt the person you are interviewing. If he/she pauses, wait. The interviewee may be deciding how they want to say something, or trying to remember.
3. ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT A GOOD INTERVIEWER IS A GOOD LISTENER.
4. Do not interject your own views and stories into the interview.
5. If the interviewee mentions something you want to know about but goes on about something else, let him/her finish what is being said. Then go back to what you want to know. If you interrupt you may miss something important.
6. If the interviewee does not want talk about something do not insist. Remember you are a guest and the interviewee's privacy is not be invaded.
7. If the interviewee gives you information that you know is wrong, do not say that the information is wrong. he/she is relating the facts as they are remembered. You may indicate the information is incorrect when you write on your notes. The wrong information can also give you a clue as to why subsequent event occurred.
8. Enjoy yourself. Oral history interviews are wonderful ways to learn about and preserve the past.

***These suggestions have been gathered from information provided by numerous colleagues who have experience doing oral history. You might also check on materials written by Willa Baum and Lynwood Montell and published by the AASLH.

RELEASE FORM

This interview, which I made with _____
on the _____ day of _____, _____, is my gift to the Oral History Project of the
Department of History, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky, and ultimately
will be housed in the Kentucky Library, at Western Kentucky University. The Kentucky
Library, however, reserves the right to reject substandard interviews.

When this interview tape and final typescript become available, they may be listened to
and read, quoted from, and cited by those who are qualified to use the above mentioned
depository site.

This interview tape and final typescript are subject, however, to the following restrictions
placed upon it by the interviewee:

(Signed) _____
(Interviewee)

(Address) _____

(Dated) _____

Understood and agreed to by:

(Interviewer)

(Date)