

Discovering oral history: What is it?

Oral history is a sound recording of historical information, obtained through an interview that preserves a person's life history or eyewitness account of a past experience—but read on. In the pages that follow, this manual invites you to explore the full implications of the terms *recording*, *interviewing*, and *preserving* as you learn to *create* oral history.

- ◆ Oral history *recordings* help listeners better understand how individuals from various viewpoints and different stations in society encountered the full range of life in their day, from everyday routines to catastrophic events. Carefully preserved, the recordings carry the witness of the present into the future, where through creative programs and publications, they can inform, instruct, and inspire generations to come.
- ◆ Creating an oral history requires two people—one who questions (an interviewer) and one who narrates (an interviewee). Two strengths distinguish oral history *interviewing*: 1) subjectivity, which allows interviewers to ask not only, What happened?, but also, How did you feel about what happened?, and 2) the partnership of co-creation, which invites interviewees to interpret and analyze their personal experiences through their own points of view and in their own words.
- ◆ *Preserving* the recorded interview fulfills the purpose of creating the oral history in the first place. Preservation begins with making recordings safe, advances to making them useful and accessible, and culminates with sharing them in creative ways with others.

Oral history projects are initiatives planned, designed, and executed by individuals or groups to create and preserve oral histories.

Oral history programs carry out oral history projects on multiple major topics or focus on one major theme. Programs may offer training and consultation services for the broader community and they often partner with one another and network with other oral historians through the Oral History Association and its affiliates.

Oral history collections preserve oral histories, including the recording and accompanying derivative materials (i.e., index or transcript) and contextual materials (i.e., maps, correspondence, photographs, interview notes). Collections are usually administered by an archivist within a library, museum, or historical society. Collections are accessed through a catalog record, finding aid, or digital collection Web portal and are offered to researchers in accordance with legal agreements signed by the interviewees and interviewers.

Oral historians

- ◆ come from academic settings, government offices, libraries and museums, medical and military sites, community centers, families, and anywhere people are studying people and the past;
- ◆ stretch beyond their immediate research needs to gather broad-based information so that their interviews address multiple historical questions;
- ◆ seek out people who may otherwise leave behind little or no material record for future generations and ask questions that may have never before been asked about a topic or event;
- ◆ arrange ways to share the results of their interviews with interviewees and their communities;
- ◆ deposit recordings, transcripts, and related materials in archives or libraries;
- ◆ produce publications and programs to distribute widely the information gained in oral history; and
- ◆ promote professional standards for research through local, state, regional, national and international organizations.