

*Oral  
History  
for Texans  
Second Edition*

by  
**Thomas L. Charlton**



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# *Chapter 3*

## *Oral History in Texas*

### *How to Interview*

At the heart of every oral history encounter stands an interview with an eyewitness. Striving to obtain fresh, supplementary information to be used in reconstructing the past, an interviewer conducts one or more question-and-answer sessions (mechanically recorded in most instances) with a willing, knowledgeable interviewee, respondent. While the selected narrator speaks informally about his or her life experiences, the interviewer gently directs the historical recording session by posing brief questions to stimulate and aid retrieval of information stored in long-term memory. With patience, the existence of rapport, the practice of positive, easy-to-learn questioning techniques, and a bit of good fortune, insightful and warm accounts of local history can readily be added to a sometimes otherwise sketchy historical record. In ideal terms, oral history interviews infuse the past with new life—from the memories and mouths of living sources of history. What follows is a discussion of the interview as a method for unlocking the past.

#### **GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Most people in modern society are now familiar with and have experienced personal interviews. They have been willing participants in numerous interviews during their lives. Physicians and dentists take down patients' medical and dental histories through series of questions. Attorneys informally interview their clients, take depositions, and orally examine witnesses in court. Job-seekers have answered batteries of questions about themselves in personnel offices. The interview, structured or otherwise, is now a common method of gathering personal information. Its proponents and users are numerous and represent widely divergent areas of life and work: journalism, social work, politics, the census, public-opinion polling, folklore, anthropology, and the writing of books, to name but a few. Ancient historians Herodotus and Thucydides, lacking written documentation, employed interviews to gain accounts of recent events. Gradually, however, historians came to rely mainly on written documentary evidence, arguing that the study of history was too important to permit much reliance on verbally transmitted material. Since World War II, however, historians in increasing numbers have embraced the personal interview as a valid research approach to study the past.

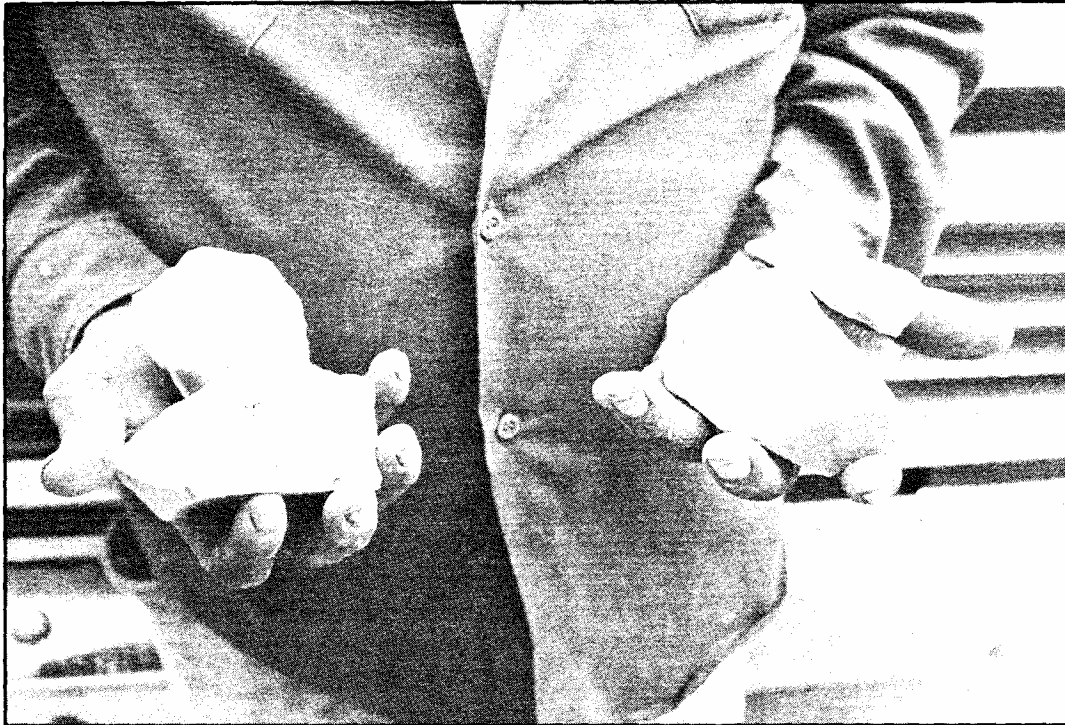


Photo: Curtis Tunnell

***“You can always tell a candelilla wax maker by looking at his hands.”***  
**(Information provided to Curtis Tunnell in an interview at the Adams Ranch, Brewster County.)**

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Historical interviewing, like other types of interviewing, has benefited greatly from changes in recording technology. Few scholars doubt that oral history’s origins date from the taking of verbal statements by the pen-and-paper method; but its rapid spread and general acceptance in recent decades are directly related to technological change in, first, the wire recorder, then, the magnetic tape recorder, and, more recently, the videotape system of camera and recorder. Probably nothing has so fixed the potential importance of mechanical recording in the minds of people more than the unguarded conversations “heard” by President Richard M. Nixon’s secretive White House recording system during the days and months of the American Watergate controversy of the early 1970s. The Watergate tapes were not records of interviews and were not examples of oral history, but they demonstrated (clearly?) the power of tape-recorded primary historical sources. Some people became extremely cautious about permitting themselves to be taped after the Watergate era, but oral history interviewing during the 1970s and into the 1980s hardly missed a beat as people, worldwide, expressed approval of both the wide array of recording devices available to the public and their use in documenting the past through planned interviews. For local

historians, the marriage has been a happy one: the recorded oral history interview is potentially one of the most successful ways of expanding a community's known heritage.

## **THE RECORDER AS AN INVITED GUEST**

Before discussing a few basic principles of oral history interviewing, it should be noted that successful use of the latest recording technology by an oral historian may largely depend on the interviewer's attitude toward equipment. The oral historian should regard any recording machine as an integral part of an interview, not as a casual listener on the side. Chapter 6 will offer more comment on proper use of recording equipment, but it should be emphasized here that the best oral history interview is like a triologue, not a dialogue. The wise interviewer seeking to capture on tape the precious memory of a living local source of history should seek to use the available technology to best advantage. The recording machine will not utter a word during the interview; but, if it is properly installed and used, it will mind its manners and enable the interviewer to depart with a new, potentially valuable segment of local history. At no time should the ethical oral historian engage in surreptitious practices such as hiding a tape recorder during an interview or otherwise recording any person's reminiscences without permission. The oral historian, then, should view recording machinery as more than an invited eavesdropper. Moreover, future linguists, anthropologists, and others will potentially find far greater value in oral history recordings if interviewers have exercised care in the use of their mechanical aids and worked to achieve documents of high technical quality.<sup>13</sup>

## **BASIC INTERVIEW PRINCIPLES**

Advice for the would-be local history interviewer can be found in many quarters. The woods are full of guidebooks published by reporters, folklorists, social psychologists, sociologists, and others whose professional lives hang on the successes of their interviews.<sup>14</sup> Relatively fewer manuals written specifically for grass-roots historians exist, however, for the simple reason that oral history interviewing methods have evolved from the field methods of some of these same professions, with the added element that local oral historians almost always plan to share their findings with both present and future generations.<sup>15</sup>

Of all the manifold admonitions about oral history interview methods appropriate for Texans, which ones are crucial? If most of this book's verbiage gets lost somewhere, what basic principles for local oral historians should be borne in mind? At the outset, the nature of an oral history interview itself may be briefly stated:

1. An oral history interview is an experience of unique, transactional (two-way) communication—a never-to-be-duplicated encounter between persons exchanging information through questions and answers.<sup>16</sup>

2. In its central purpose, such an interview differs from ordinary conversation as it aims to gather and preserve historical information.
3. An oral history interview is the result of a creative event, an act of discovery that generates a new historical document (the record of the interview).
4. While an interview's content and characteristics may vary widely, it will usually be either autobiographical or topical in form.
5. More than just recording talk, oral history interviewing is based on people's capacities for empathy, participation, and observation as the interviewer strives to be a perfect listener.<sup>17</sup>
6. An oral history interview is usually an attempt to supplement the written historical record through a respondent's descriptions of the past.

Oral history's general nature, then, causes one to focus on both the elementary and the fundamental aspects of human communication.<sup>18</sup> Much of what is taken for granted during ordinary conversation may happen as well during an oral history interview and is one of the main reasons so many persons enjoy oral history interviews. On the other hand, local historians who plan and conduct oral history interview sessions can achieve recorded historical documents of high quality if they will learn and practice some of the basic interviewing methods proven successful in professional settings. Many of these methods—including both techniques and strategies—require only common sense, concentration, and a willingness to learn from one's experience. While there are some aspects of oral history that lend themselves to philosophical, abstract reasoning, interviewers usually soon turn to the practical problems and circumstances of *doing* oral history. Oral history interviewing, then, is a learned skill, and it is available to almost all people.

Before examining advisable oral history interviewing methods, the fifth of the foregoing statements on the nature of oral history merits more attention. What does it mean to say that *interviewing is based on people's capacities for empathy, participation, and observation*? Obviously, the one who arranges for an oral history interview and sees it through to completion by asking questions, selecting some of the topics to be included, and generally stimulating responses from the willing respondent is also a participant in the process called oral history. The interviewer's significant role as an observer comes from attentiveness during the interview. As the respondent; interviewee speaks from memory, the interviewer listens to the content of the verbal statements and adjusts the pace of the session accordingly. An alert interviewer also observes the respondent's facial expressions and other body movements that may convey signals about the respondent, such as a need for increased expression of sensitivity on the part of the interviewer. Empathy—sometimes called rapport, identification, insight, or understanding—is that essential ingredient in an oral history interview that is perhaps best seen as the interviewer's effort to imagine how the interviewee feels about what is being talked about during the session. Empathy also may be defined as an attempt to understand another's point of view. Many oral historians have reported a close, direct correlation between the level of interviewer-respondent rapport and the quality of the resulting recorded oral reconstruction of the past.

Empathy either exists or is absent during every oral history interview. Its presence may depend on several factors: Does the interviewer have accurate information about the respondent's past or present situation? Have the two persons experienced similar situations in life? Can the interviewer imaginatively construct situations and questions that fit the respondent? How well does the interviewer remember similar life experiences? These and other factors often influence empathy / rapport. Remember, *one does not need to be the same chronological age as an interviewee in an oral history session to establish or demonstrate empathy; trust may also grow between the participants if the respondent senses that the interviewer is sincere/y trying to understand the other's point of view.* Many an oral history interview has been built on such a trusting relationship, as well as on proper application of interviewing methods. The local historian, conscious of the need to develop empathy with the respondent, may also benefit from the simple act of devoting a few minutes to explaining the purpose of the interview and how, as a personal document, it may add to the preservation of the community's heritage. Small talk prior to the interview—simple statements about the weather, personal health, or the interview setting—sometimes also often proves valuable in developing the desired warm relationship between the oral historian and the living source of history. Finally, the kind of rapport essential to good oral history may result from nothing more than the interviewer's practice of courtesy and regard for the respondent as a unique human being, a special citizen of his/her era of history. When this kind of interpersonal relationship exists during an interview, empathy often flows freely and the two participants both give and receive its rewarding benefits.<sup>19</sup>

## INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

The typical oral history interview is a nonstandardized (without written questionnaire) approach to the study of the past, be it the lifespan of an individual or one person's recollections of a single event or time. The conscientious interviewer is responsible for becoming as familiar as possible with the subject(s) of each interview, for in such background research will usually lie suggestions of topics to pursue during each interview. When conventional sources have been exhausted and when general information about the prospective interviewee has been obtained, the interviewer's thoughts will naturally turn to research technique and strategy, both of which can play important roles in successful oral history.

**Open questions.** The hallmark of most oral history is its use of open-ended questions—queries that call for interviewee responses in more than a few words. Closed questions have the opposite effect. Both open and closed questions are appropriate, but it is the open question that often sets the general tone for the entire interview and lets the respondent know that lengthy statements are both acceptable and encouraged. Open-ended questions, those that ask for why, how, and other descriptive answers, also call on the respondent to select the pieces of information (and

their order) that relate to the subject under consideration. Such an approach is also advisable when the interviewer's prior knowledge of the topic is very limited; a respondent's answer to a general question may provide a helpful, broad outline to follow during later portions of the interview. Open questions that ask "What happened ...?" also tell the respondent that the interviewer is flexible and willing to move in several possible directions with succeeding questions. When an open question is used, the interviewer should endeavor not to indicate how it should be answered but rather encourage a full, multifaceted response by the narrator.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most often used open questions in oral history is not really a question. It says, "Tell me about \_\_\_\_\_." This is an interview technique that employs the imperative in a gentle manner. A "tell-me-about" request announces the subject (general or specific) and asks the respondent to recall and describe it. This technique may be used in numerous historical interviewing situations but the concurrent use of a variety of open-ended questions will likely help maintain respondent interest in recollecting life experiences. The alert interviewer will consciously use a mix of open questions and observe carefully the different kinds of responses they each produce. Sample open-ended questions appropriate for oral history are listed below.

1. Why did your family move from Louisiana to Texas?
2. How did your family get along after its move?
3. What happened when the tornado struck your house?
4. Tell me about the home you lived in as a child.

Each of these sample questions could be followed either by other open questions or by more specific follow-up questions. In using open questions, the interviewer makes a conscious effort to obtain answers that allow for the complex nature of life experience. In oral history, the emphasis should be on stimulating the respondent to speak freely and descriptively from memory. Open-ended questions are, in most instances, the best ways to elicit elaborate interviewee statements; but the interviewer should also be prepared to use other methods as well.

**Closed questions.** Questions that call for short, specific answers can also be important in oral history. A response of a few words may be just as important in documenting a particular point in local history as its longer counterpart. With some respondents, open-ended questions will naturally lead to topics that can be explored through closed questions. Other respondents, however, will function better if closed questions are used to name the topics to be discussed before going on to more open, general questions. As a rule, the interviewer will begin with and use open questions at various times during the oral history interview and insert closed questions to probe or pursue details at appropriate intervals during the session. Examples of closed-ended questions useful in local history are listed below.



1. When you moved to the Texas Panhandle during the 1920s, on which rail line did you travel?
2. Who was your campaign manager when you first ran for public office?
3. What foods did your family eat during the hard winter months?
4. Where did you open your next business after the Depression passed?
5. When did you cast your first ballot in Texas?

These and other types of closed questions may lead to either further closed questions or opportunities to pose open questions.<sup>21</sup>

**Probes.** Questions and statements that probe what has been said are often effective means of persuading a respondent to reach back in memory for additional, more specific information. Even in situations when excellent rapport exists and the respondent seems to be talking spontaneously about life experiences, the oral historian will need to employ various probes in guiding the interview toward its objectives. Relevant, complete, and clear responses may result from an interviewer's efforts to obtain further, clarifying statements about a given topic. Seven general types of probes are available to the local history interviewer:

1. *Silence:* The interviewer, surrendering control over the topic for a few moments, may give the respondent additional time to ponder the topic or the last question. Use of silent probes will slow the pace of the interview and sometimes will establish or contribute to a thoughtful mood.
2. *Encouragement:* The interviewer may signal that the respondent should continue talking about the chosen topic. "I see, really?" "Is that so?" "Uh huh, hmmm," or other verbal or nonverbal utterances may accomplish this goal. Gestures, such as a head nod, a smile, or an open hand, may also be effective here as encouragement for the respondent.
3. *Immediate elaboration:* The interviewer may reinforce what the respondent has just said by quickly asking for more information. "Tell me more about ...," "Please elaborate on that ...," "And then what occurred?" "What else happened ...?" are all examples of such probes and ask the respondent to continue speaking and tell more.
4. *Immediate clarification:* Specific information may follow an interviewer's use of probes asking for data related to a prior point made by the respondent. *One type:* "What happened when you arrived?" Or, "Where were you when that happened in town?" *Another type:* "How did you feel about that event?" Or, "Why do you suppose he did that?" Or, "When did those events occur?"

5. *Retrospective elaboration:* The interviewer, asking the respondent to go back to a topic or a statement made earlier, may reopen a subject with a general probe. *Example:* “A few minutes ago you mentioned your teacher’s influence in your life. Tell me about her.”
6. *Retrospective clarification:* Going back to information given earlier, the interviewer may ask for more details of a situation. *Example:* “You told me how you first saw the dust storm coming near Amarillo; what did you do when that happened?”
7. *Mutation:* The interviewer may open a new topic by referring to something the respondent has said. *Example:* “So far, you have told me about your own experiences in high school sports; now tell me about the school’s other athletic teams when you were a student there.”

Each of these seven types of general probes can be very effective in interviewing. The oral historian cannot use all of the above types of probes at once, but will do well to experiment with them and be conscious of their potential value. Immediate and retrospective clarification probes will come most naturally. The value of the other probes will grow as the interviewer gains experience and observes varying results as they are used in actual oral history settings.

After gaining experience, interviewers will probably want to employ two additional, slightly more sophisticated types of probes: The *recapitulation probe* and the *reflective probe*. The recapitulation probe is often appropriate after a respondent has told a lengthy, chronologically organized story. This type of probe attempts to take the respondent back to an early point in the story. Summarizing several points in the story, the interviewer then poses a retrospective probe, an example of which might be:

You told me that in 1931 you rushed to East Texas to get a job in the new oil field there. You worked on several rigs that brought in good wells. You said most of the men there found steady work in the oil field. Tell me about how you lived in the oil-boom community.

The object of a recapitulation probe is to stimulate the respondent to go through a specific story a second time and add fresh details. Helping the respondent through the story again, the interviewer should ask the probe and remain as neutral as possible while the respondent selects details from memory and enlarges the documentation.

The reflective probe, another subtle stratagem, is the interviewer’s effort to mirror or repeat what the respondent has just said. No direct question is asked in this type of probe, but the reflective probe will often send a signal to the respondent to add information to the historical record. The interviewer may choose to echo certain words of the respondent’s previous statement; or, using a slightly different, if

somewhat risk approach, the interviewer may try to reflect what the respondent *meant* in the previous statement. A combination of these two approaches is also possible. A reflective probe may be shown in the following example:

*Respondent:* My family moved to Ellis County when I was young so we kids could attend better schools.

*Interviewer:* So you kids could attend better schools.

*Respondent:* Yes, that was the main reason. Our home county in East Texas had only a few scattered schools and my folks wanted us kids to get high-school diplomas.

Reflective probes can be overdone during an oral history interview, and they may cause serious interruptions and disrupt the respondent's comments on favorite or important subjects. They should be used sparingly and only by the interviewer who is listening carefully to what the respondent is saying. Such probes may help build empathy, but if the interviewer incorrectly reflects the respondent's words or feelings, such probes may damage and lessen empathy or rapport.<sup>22</sup>

## INTERVIEWING STRATEGY

There is no best strategy to use in conducting an oral history interview. Each interview will be unique; results will vary from day to day, respondent to respondent, and interviewer to interviewer. The age, sex, race, and other distinguishing features of the interviewer will influence each oral history session, just as the same variables will apply to the respondent—the living source of history. These are significant factors in the gathering of local history through interviews and should be among the list of potentially inhibiting barriers discussed during the planning of local oral history. (Is Mr. Jones, the new, young lawyer in town, the best person to interview Mrs. Smith, who has been an organist at the local Methodist church for over 50 years?) There are a few time-tested professional strategies that should be considered in oral history interviewing, and local historians wanting to improve the quality of their efforts are advised to incorporate them into their activity.<sup>23</sup>

Unobtrusive strategies that may lead to high-yield oral history interviewing are based on both profound and simple advice:

1. A first interview may begin with basic biographical questions. The respondent is usually able to speak easily about his her own early life, education, and family,

- which may help build empathy rapport between the participants in the interview.
2. An alternate approach to a first interview is to begin with the “obvious” question (the broad, central query that is behind the respondent’s selection for the project) and *then* ask for biographical and other information after the “obvious” question has been answered.
  3. When they are appropriate, controversial questions on potentially sensitive topics should usually be asked after good rapport has been established. Questions that do not put the respondent “on the spot” signal that the interviewer is not a personal threat or aggressively trying to cause embarrassment.
  4. Broad, brief questions evoking lengthy statements of reminiscence should enable the respondent to determine that the interviewer will patiently help document the past.
  5. The interviewer should concentrate on asking one question at a time and avoid confronting the interviewee with complex, difficult-to-follow queries. Moreover, use words that the respondent will readily understand.
  6. An awkwardly phrased question by the interviewer is acceptable and may assure the respondent that informal, imperfect statements are welcome.
  7. The interviewer should express curiosity (a natural trait for the historian!) and keep the interview going with “tell-me-more-about \_\_\_\_\_” probes.
  8. Listen for opportunities to pose questions that ask for alternative sides of a situation. For example, if a respondent has just described the joys of his her childhood home, the interviewer may ask for a description of the family’s problems during a particular era, and vice versa. Be contrary minded while avoiding being merely contrary.
  9. Probe for details until the respondent shows signs that his / her memory has been depleted on a given topic. In pursuing details, the interviewer may discover unanticipated facets of a topic. If a respondent provides one example, ask for a second or a third. If several examples are mentioned, ask which one was most important.
  10. Don’t hesitate to ask the respondent to describe where he / she was (vantage point) throughout a story’s events to aid documentation.
  11. Assure and reassure the respondent during the interview that his / her recollections are acceptable, even if they vary significantly from local common wisdom. Incorrect information should not immediately be labeled or challenged as such; the interviewer should not contest or personally dispute what is said by the respondent.
  12. Ideally, the interviewer’s field recorder should be allowed to run uninterrupted throughout the session, with possible exceptions made for telephone calls or the arrival of a person who walks into the interview and halts it. During inevitable silences, leave the machine running and show no concern about wasting recording tape.
  13. The interviewer should sit close enough to the respondent to enable eye-to-eye

contact between the two. Watch for signs of physical fatigue as well, and use this closeness to improve rapport.

14. The interviewer should reveal enough information to demonstrate adequate preparation to the respondent without appearing to be an expert on a given historical topic.
15. Permit the respondent to move far afield in reminiscing and ramble for a few minutes before reminding him/her of the topic. Give the respondent time to come to the point while listening carefully for cues for later probes.
16. The interviewer may elect to ask the respondent to evaluate or interpret an event from the past. This can be done by asking, "Why do you suppose happened at that time?" Or, "Looking back at this event, how important was it in the long run?"
17. Physical descriptions of people mentioned by the respondent can help make oral history vivid. The interviewer need only to ask, "What did Miss Jones look like?" to gain potential access to other observable, recalled traits of Miss Jones. Another approach: "What was Miss Jones like?"
18. If an extremely complex, confusing event has just been described by the respondent, the interviewer may aid the clarity of the record by saying: "Now help me understand what happened. Tell me again how that occurred and give me an example." Interviewer innocence may yield great dividends.
19. In general, avoid asking leading questions that suggest how they should be answered. Do not ask, "Why was the town's mayor during the 1930s such a marvelous person?" Rather, ask, "What was the mayor like during the 1930s?" This technique will permit the respondent to retain the perception of history and not answer questions to fit the interviewer's conceptions of the past.
20. The interviewer should usually work from a list of topics, but not a rigid schedule of questions. Photos, clippings, and other aids to memory familiar to the respondent are acceptable and may be helpful. The interview outline may be regarded as a shopping list: that is, memory does not necessarily follow the order in which the topics are laid out in an outline. If schooling and personal religion are both on the list and the interviewee begins discussing personal religion, don't cut him / her off just because schooling is on the list before religion.
21. The interview should be conducted where the respondent will be at ease—a quiet setting agreeable to the participants.
22. Generally speaking, only one respondent should be interviewed at a time. The physical presence of even one additional person may affect the level of trust during the interview.
23. Document the end of the interview by thanking the respondent "on tape" for the recording session. Such a sign-off will signal the user of the interview (or the transcriber) that the oral history interview was over when the recording ended.
24. At the beginning of the tape (and maybe at the end, also), the interviewer should document the facts describing the interview. These include: name of respondent, name of interviewer, place of the session, date of the session, name or purpose of

the project, sponsoring organization or institution, and other data essential to archival use of the interview.

25. When the session is over, the courteous interviewer will linger a few minutes and express additional appreciation to the respondent. Perhaps this is the time to ask for another interview. Try to make supportive, neutral comments during this chat, listening for ideas to include in future interviews. Watch for physical items (letters, diaries, scrapbooks, photos) that may be of value to the local library or museum—as well as supporting documentation in planning and conducting additional interviews with the respondent.

All of the above strategies assume that the interviewer will endeavor to conduct every oral history session with a nonjudgmental, open-minded attitude toward both the respondent and the historical topic(s) at hand. When a prepared local historian shows keen interest in the information recounted in an interview and appreciation for the respondent's efforts, very positive results are possible. Interviewer praise for the respondent reinforces the permissive, receptive atmosphere so necessary to objective oral history at the local level.

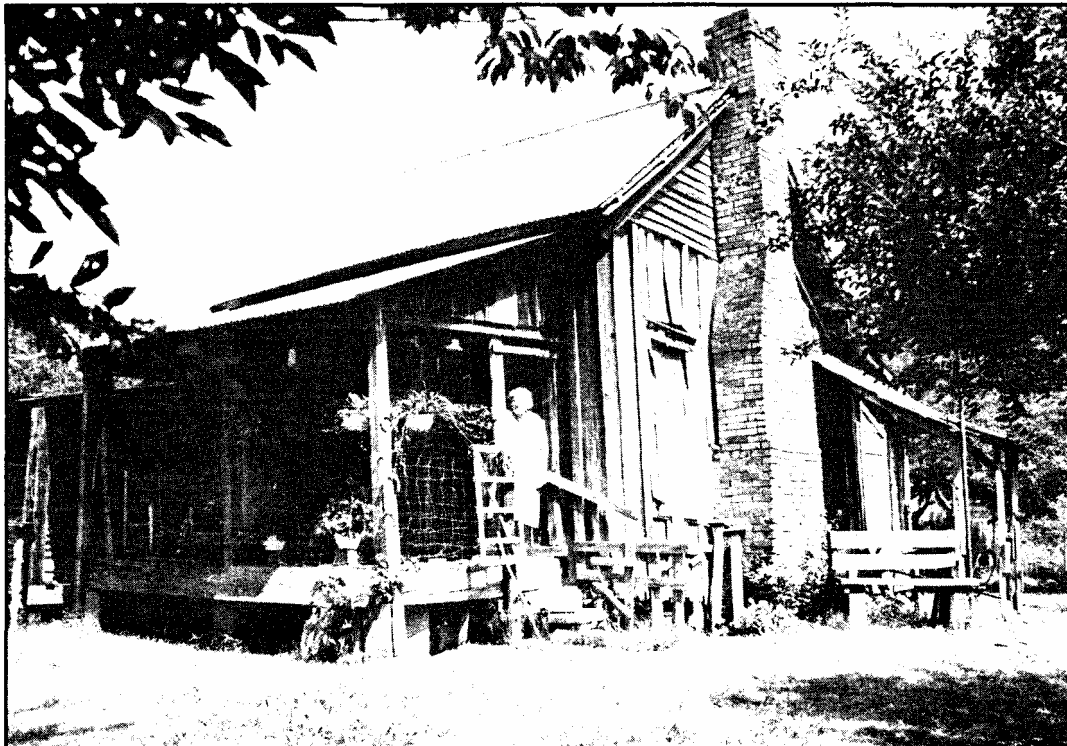


Photo: Curtis Tunnell

***“My mother built this house.”*** (Information provided to Curtis Tunnell in an interview in Ponta, Texas.)

## FUNNELS IN THE INTERVIEW

The role of the interviewer is to guide the respondent through both obvious and not-so-obvious topics in an oral history session. Following a list of suitable topics will not suffice. As the interview proceeds, the interviewer must make quick decisions and supply additional material to help move the interview toward desired objectives. The probes discussed earlier in this chapter will be most effective if they are organized or ranked to achieve maximum benefit. A perfect ordering of the probes is probably impossible but they may achieve interesting, valuable results when they are posed in funnel-like sequences.

**The funnel-shaped sequence.** A simple funnel-shaped sequence of questions exists when all of the questions are related to the same topic and each successive question is narrower in scope than the preceding one. In this type of interview sequence, then, the questions move from the general to the specific, through open questions to the final probe, perhaps a closed question. While an entire interview may resemble a funnel, it is more likely that funnel sequences will occur at topical intervals throughout the interview, with one or more funnel sequences within each topic. The following questions illustrate a funnel sequence:

1. What led you to go into business after college?
2. How did you select the business you would develop?
3. After you chose a business, where did you locate it?
4. How did you finance your first business on Main Street?
5. How many years did it take to repay your first business loan to the bank?
6. What rate of interest did the First National Bank charge for your first business loan?

Funnel-shaped sequences of questions may eliminate the need for some probes. Actually, in each of the above sample questions, further analysis might be achieved through other funnel sequences. Interviewers soon learn that such approaches yield more measured responses than those that come from general probes. If taken to its ultimate logical conclusion, a funnel sequence might conclude with a yes-or-no question.<sup>24</sup>

**The “inverted” funnel-shaped sequence.** There are also times in oral history interviewing when a topic should be opened with a narrow question, followed by a pattern of ever-broadening questions. When a respondent seems motivated to talk in detailed terms about the past more than generalizing about a given topic, an inverted funnel-shaped sequence of questions may prove beneficial. The opposite of the funnel sequence, the inverted-funnel sequence simply moves from the specific to the general.

This type of sequence is sometimes useful in focusing a respondent's attention on small aspects of a topic before moving on to broader, more interpretive concerns. The following sequence illustrates an inverted-funnel approach:

1. How many people died in the 1979 Wichita Falls tornado?
2. How many other people were injured that day?
3. To what extent were injured tornado victims able to call for help?
4. What kinds of rescue programs were available during the disaster?
5. Tell me about Wichita Falls's overall civil defense/disaster organizations during the decade prior to the 1979 tornado.

Inverted-funnel sequences, as well as funnel sequences, require some care and design, although experienced interviewers will employ them spontaneously when it seems advantageous to exploit the memory of a respondent by "picking" his or her brain. One other advantage for the person conducting the oral history interview is that the "funneling" approach produces greater control over the topics than other interview methods. Some planning and much trial-and-error experience are the best guides to this type of interviewing.<sup>25</sup>

## **THE INTERVIEW SETTING**

The physical circumstances of an oral history interview are important, although difficult, to calculate. A quiet setting, significant as it is, may not assure a productive interview if intrusive elements are present. Many oral historians prefer to conduct interviews in homes, offices, or other settings very familiar to their respondents. Some interviewees will ask that their interviews be held where privacy may be assured. Comfortable furniture and "soft" surroundings characterized by carpeting, draperies, and pleasant visual situations can be helpful. The interviewee's physical comfort should be a concern of the researcher.

Experienced oral historians, borrowing interviewing concepts from psychologists, sometimes combine interview settings and interview techniques to achieve specialized results. With due respect for the respondent's privacy, the oral historian may find that deeper, more thoughtful recollections occur when a more deliberate, slightly more intimate approach is taken. Some oral historians, for example, report significant results when they carefully use such techniques as slowing the interview pace, speaking in lower volume, leaning forward or moving nearer the respondent, reaching out to touch the hand or arm of the respondent, or otherwise creatively using the physical space between the researcher and the interviewee. Such practices carry significant



ethical responsibilities for the interviewer they should never be employed to exploit living sources of the past.

The physical placement of the recording equipment is also an important element in successful oral history practice. In general, all recording devices (both tape recorders and microphones) should be located in unobtrusive places during an interview session. The tape recorder should be where the researcher can keep an eye on it but far enough away from the respondent so as not to be a constant distraction during the interview. Try to avoid any situation in which the respondent's line of vision crosses the spinning reels of magnetic tape on a recorder. The use of lightweight lavalier-type microphones (discussed in a later chapter) may help the respondent relax and forget that a tape recording is being made. If a table microphone is used to record the interview, it should be placed on soft material (perhaps a handkerchief) to absorb noise and the effects of a hard surface. If only one mike is used, it should be placed nearer the respondent than the interviewer, especially when the respondent's voice is not as strong as the interviewer's speaking volume.

## **THE INTERVIEW AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE**

How reliable is an oral history interview? How may the interview be compared with more conventional types of historical evidence such as newspapers, court hearings, letters, diaries, and others? For oral history to enjoy respect as historical evidence, it must be understood for what it is.

One obvious point here is that, as a research approach that relies heavily on human memory, oral history inescapably depends largely on how people have perceived life's experiences and how well they have stored information about those experiences in their long-term memory banks. Memory at work during an oral history interview consists of efforts to reconstruct what a person once comprehended and organized for possible future use. No person can completely recall the events of his; her life and, while some persons are able to reconstruct verbally certain past events in seemingly vivid detail, all memory should perhaps be regarded as fragile and subject to error.

Since oral history most often strives to record the recollections of eyewitnesses, it should also be noted that the comments of interviewees about events prior to their own life spans do not, technically speaking, add to oral history's body of knowledge. A person telling stories about his; her family's activities four or five generations ago is probably relating accounts gained from other sources. Such information, even though it is an integral part of an oral history interview, is seen as secondary, maybe even tertiary evidence. Such "oral hearsay," while it is definitely not oral history, may have other value, but its lack of eyewitness value creates certain problems for the user.<sup>26</sup>

Those who use oral history interviews in any way will be served well if they possess and apply a healthy skepticism. Students of history should view all historical data as records subject to error and misinterpretation. Primary sources are often treated with greater respect than they merit. Public documents, correspondence, newspaper

accounts, photographs, maps—all examples of important grist for the historian's mill are not always free from bias or error. Indeed, sometimes they are no more reliable than tape-recorded oral memoirs, which is just another way of saying that oral history may often be as reliable as other primary sources.<sup>27</sup>

William W. Moss of the Smithsonian Institution has suggested that the source materials of history be divided into five classifications: transactional records, selective records, recollections, reflections, and analyses. The first group, *transactional records*, consists of documents that are what they say they are. Deeds, treaties, wills, contracts, laws, constitutions, and other “official” documents are transactional records that may be accepted at face value. They may contain controversial points of interpretation, but they are primary evidence that may stand alone. An oral history is not a transactional record.

*Selective records* are those that describe portions of what happened in the past. Photographs and tape recordings (audio or video) of contemporary events are selective records because it is usually impossible to make a total record of events. They present what contemporary observers and recorders believe is significant enough to preserve. Reality is interpreted and only partially captured in such documentation, but selective records are primary sources that command much attention. An oral history fails the test of this type of historical document.

Some *recollections*, recorded soon after the events under study, are rich in detail and relatively free of erroneous interviewee interpretation seen in some recollections recorded much later in time. Recollections taken after long passages of time must be judged as accounts of the past sifted through life's experiences. As primary sources standing in time far from the events of the past they describe, recollections—even those by persons who were nearby eyewitnesses to the events described—may or may not be as reliable as other historical evidence. When an interviewer helps to create a recollection by posing questions, this outside stimulus itself influences the act of recalling the past and may inadvertently shape the recollection. Most human memory is selective in nature; recollections are even more so. Oral history interviews with persons recalling past life experiences share these problems. Historians may find much value in such recollections if they lend insight into the past, if the memoirs help users understand what respondents considered important in the past.

Some oral history interviews contain more than simple recollections by also including respondents' spoken *reflections* about the past. Reflections are those statements concerning what a person thinks about his / her life experiences in the past. Such thoughts are rooted in the present; when they occur during the recording of oral history, these reflections may tell the historian as much or more about the present situation as they reveal about the past. Reflections sometimes occur when, for example, a respondent leans back and summarizes what all the events surrounding a given topic over several decades mean for him / her *today!* The interviewee may have a rather accurate view of the past, but historians using such reflections should probably rank them rather low as evidence unless they prove to be valid as a result of further testing.

Historical records in the form of *analyses* are usually quite complex. In historical research, they may involve hypothetical tests of data in which several kinds of evidence are compared in efforts to reconstruct reasonable pictures of what happened in the past. An analysis surpasses consideration of factual information and often is done for a specific purpose. Fair analysis is possible if all available evidence is considered, along with the analyst's personal perception of the past (bias) as part of the exercise. Oral historians sometimes ask respondents to help analyze historical evidence by posing theoretical questions that test the relative strengths of pieces of the puzzle that make up the past. Such questions should be used with great care. Beginning oral historians need to realize that careful historical analysis while the tapes are spinning on the recorders is very difficult to accomplish. The best historical analysis is probably that which incorporates oral history evidence into a larger corroboration of all existing primary and other sources.

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From the above discussion it may be seen that oral history is documentation that should be subjected to rigorous tests of historical evidence. Every oral history interview will require careful evaluation by present and future users. Those who contemplate an oral history's intrinsic value will need to go beyond the mere fact that an interview recorded and preserved certain data, primary or otherwise. Questions should be raised: When was the recording made? Under what conditions? Who conducted the interview? For what purpose? Where was the interview recorded? Even the type of recording equipment used during the interview may be of value to future scholars. Oral history's potential is great, but it must be viewed from the perspective that it is only one complex part of the evidence of the past.

## **SUMMARY**

This chapter presents both general and specific information about the interview as the heart of oral history. It assumes that most local historians will not be using tightly worded, written questions but will strive to gather a fuller picture of the past through more unstructured, open approaches. The element of time, so important in almost all historical research, will need to be a part of both planning for oral history and conducting of interviews in a local history project. Both open and closed questions will be useful. The various types of available probes, used skillfully with some of the strategies outlined above, will likely lead to positive interviewing results in the community and the preservation of evidence of one of the most interesting elements of history—human element.

## NOTES

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<sup>13</sup> Edward D. Ives, *A Manual for Field Workers* (Orono, Maine: Northeast Folklore Society, 1974), 18-19. Also published by University of Tennessee Press, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> Among the leading works of this genre are: Stephen A. Richardson, Barbara Snell Dohrenwend, and David Klein, *Interviewing: Its Forms and Functions* (New York: Basic Books, 1965); Raymond L. Gorden, *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques, and Tactics*, rev. ed. (Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1975); John Brady, *The Craft of Interviewing* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); and Ives, *A Manual for Field Workers* (1974).

<sup>15</sup> Useful oral history manuals include: Willa K. Baum, *Oral History for the Local Historical Society* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1969); William W. Moss, *Oral History Program Manual* (New York: Prager Publishers, 1974); Nancy Whistler, *Oral History Workshop Guide* (Denver: Colorado Center for Oral History, 1978); Betty McKeever Key, *Maryland Manual of Oral History* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1979); Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Derek Reimer, David Mattison, and Allen W. Specht, eds., *Voices: A Guide to Oral History* (Victoria, B.C.: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1984). Teachers should also consult John A. Neuenschwander, *Oral History as a Teaching Approach* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1976).

<sup>16</sup> James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 85.

<sup>17</sup> Gorden, *Interviewing*, 32-33.

<sup>18</sup> E. Culpepper Clark, Michael J. Hyde, and Eva M. McMahan, "Communications in the Oral History Interview: Investigating Problems of Interpreting Oral Data," *International Journal of Oral History* I (February 1980): 28-40; Michael J. Hyde, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Communicative Experience: The Paradigm of Oral History," *Man and World*, 13 (1980):81-98; and Charles Joyner, "Oral History as Communicative Event," *The Oral History Review* 7 (1979):27-52.

<sup>19</sup> Gorden, *Interviewing*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 350-52; Richardson, Dohrenwend, and Klein, *Interviewing: Its Forms and Functions*, 147-53.

<sup>21</sup> Gorden, *Interviewing*, 415-17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 426-39.

<sup>23</sup> Baum, *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, 32-35; Key, *Maryland Manual of Oral History*, 28-30; and Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 165-85.

<sup>24</sup> Gorden, *Interviewing*, 415-17.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 417-20. See also Brady, *The Craft of Interviewing*, 72-75.

<sup>26</sup> Cullom Davis, Kathryn Back, and Kay MacLean, *Oral History: From Tape to Type* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1977), 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>28</sup> William W. Moss, "Oral History: An Appreciation," *The American Archivist*, 40 (October 1977):429-39.