Principles, Procedures, Techniques and Best Practices for Conducting Oral Histories

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Background

This document is largely the result of a collaborative effort by Jeff McCormack and Judith Mickelson who prepared an early version of this document in 2011 for the Virginia Food Heritage Project (VFHA). The mission of VFHA is to gather local knowledge about local agriculture and food heritage, and to use this knowledge to inform decision-making that will shape the central Virginia landscape. Additional information about VFHA can be found at their website at http://vafoodheritage.wordpress.com.

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In preparing this document, the authors have drawn mostly on their direct experience in recording oral histories in a variety of settings. This is not meant to be a comprehensive guide as there are also various handbooks and manuals available, as well as Internet resources. Two especially useful resources are the Oral History Association (http://www.oralhistory.org) and Making Sense of Oral History (http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/).

Introduction

Oral history is the collection and study of historical information given as oral testimony from individuals who have first-hand knowledge about past events. Oral histories are conducted by an interviewer who makes an audio or video recording of an interviewee (narrator), with both participants agreeing to create an historical record of the past. Their mutual goals are to preserve memories, observations, and perspectives for future generations. Oral histories provide especially valuable insights into the past, as they often provide unique perspectives that cannot be found in written sources. Oral histories also occasionally provide surprising insights that help us interpret the present, or offer perspectives that might be valuable in the future.

The oral history interview process is basically a disciplined, somewhat measured, thoughtful relaxed conversation or dialog, with a focus on a particular topic. Often the topics are worked
and reworked by the interviewer, ideally in the form of open-ended questions that encourage the interviewee to remember details, to make connections between seemingly unrelated recollections, to clarify what is unclear, to gain new perspectives, and to revisit the past, evaluating what meaning events or memories had then, and what meaning they have now. When the interviewer is comfortable with the process, it has the feeling of a dance; the interviewer being very sensitive to the energy of the interviewee, sometimes leading, and sometimes following, but always gently guiding. One oral historian, Linda Shopes has written, “the best interviews have a thinking-out-loud quality.”

At the end of the interview, a permanent record is made, usually in the form of a transcript that is made available to the general public and researchers. The original audio and video should be retained in case it is needed to remedy errors in transcription, to decipher inaudible sections, or to revisit later to detect nuances of meaning that may be difficult to convey in the transcript. There are different schools of thought as to how much the transcript should be edited. Largely the transcription process is a matter of personal style; however, feedback words and sounds such as “uh-huh” are usually left out of the transcription, but such words are left in if they convey meaning. If the interviewee uses a dialect, it may be important to render the dialect in the transcription. Sometimes converting improper grammar to proper English is appropriate, but in other cases, overly sanitizing the grammar can cause the interviewee to seem less authentic. How the audio and video is transcribed can depend a lot on the intended use of the transcript.

When oral histories are published or distributed in some form, they should be presented within a larger context. It is often appropriate for the interviewee or oral historian to offer differing interpretations, alternative viewpoints, or contextual information that could provide important guidance for the reader. Often a critical approach to the oral testimony is warranted: oral histories are often colorful, emotionally compelling, have a sense of immediacy and tangibility, and have a seductive quality, but portions of them may not be true. As Rachel Naomi Remen, author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom* says, “All stories are full of bias and uniqueness; they mix fact with meaning. This is the root of their power.” Thus it is the responsibility of the oral historian to strive for intellectual honesty, to seek the proper context for presenting the story, and to ensure that no bias or stereotypes are introduced into the interpretations that are made. When the interviewer and interviewee are of different race, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, or cultural background, it is especially important to avoid introducing cultural blindness or bias that may color the narrative surrounding the story.

**Equipment Selection**

Equipment selection is often influenced by personal choice, equipment features, and budgetary concerns. Inexpensive audio and video recorders may be used in most cases. When conducting interviews in undeveloped countries and remote areas where there is little or no electricity and no easy access to fresh batteries, special thought must be given to carrying extra batteries and memory cards for the audio recorder. A video recorder used in these circumstances should have a hard drive, extra memory cards, extra batteries, and a battery charger (when electricity is available).

In 2008, Jeff McCormack had a discussion with a reporter from National Public Radio regarding equipments suggestions. Following are some of the notes from that conversation:
Website source of information on audio recorders: http://www.transom.org This site has “how to” tutorials for field recording. It also has equipment reviews and a chart for evaluating different microphones. National Public Radio reporters often use this site.

Recorder brands, models, and options:

- **Sony PCM-D50** – Costs about $500. Though it uses a proprietary format for the audio card files, the format is easily converted to WAV files. One nice feature of this is the wheel on the side for easily adjusting recording volume. Uses flash memory, and also memory cards. The ALC (automatic level control) for volume is very accessible through the turn wheel on the side.

- **Zoom H2 and H4** – Good features, and less expensive ($150 to $200 for the H2 and about $250 for the H4). It is a bit more clunky than the Sony. Uses both flash memory and cards. Has a good built-in condenser microphone. The volume control is accessible by a menu rather than the volume control wheel on the Sony, so the volume control is less accessible, and requires more than one hand to control the volume. Has both ALC and manual volume control.

- **Edriol R9** – Similar to the Zoom but smaller and uses memory cards. The H4 has XLR. Not as versatile as the Zoom.

- **Morantz PMD-620** – Morantz has long been considered the industry standard, but newer brand names may be better. The BIOS (basic input/output system) is made by Morantz. Uses four AA batteries but has short recording time of about two hours maximum.

Recorder features:

- **ALC** – Automatic Level Control. Check to see how easily ALC is accessed – through a menu or through a wheel or some other means.

- **Limiter** – Check to see if there is a limiter on the volume control (acts like a governor), preventing the volume from spiking and causing distortion.

- **Number of microphone inputs** – It is good to have two microphone inputs, one for a lavalier microphone and another for a clip on, or to record in two channels.

- **Pre-amplifier** – Cheap recorders may have cheap pre-amps. When the volume is turned higher you get more hiss.

Microphone types, brands, and features:

- **Lavalier** – A hand-held microphone

- **Clip on** – Tends to produce hiss with a dynamic microphone, but not with a condenser microphone.

- **Condenser microphone** – Best used for places where there is background noise. Good ones can be pointed in a noisy setting. It can pick up the sound 10 to 15 feet away while leaving distracting noises behind. It can be held a further distance from the subject, about two to three feet away. For best results in the field it must be pointed at the subject’s mouth or the audio will fade out. Condenser microphones are more sensitive to wind and handling noises.

- **Shotgun condenser microphone** – This is the type recommended for field work.

- **Dynamic omni-directional microphone** – These have a limited range, about 6 inches from the mouth and are not as good for reproducing softer audio.

- **Brands:**
• **Tram** is best for this style of recording. You might want to have another cheaper microphone as a backup.
• **Audiotechnica** – AT835B Cost is around $200 to $300.
• **Rode** NT-4
• **Beyer** M58
• **Electawire** RE90?
• **Shure** SM58 – lower cost and less expensive (about $100)

Field recording techniques:

- **Volume testing** – To test volume control, do a test recording at both low and high volume. This will let you know if you are getting too much hiss at high volume, and not enough sound at low volume. At high volume you can get more hiss, but at lower volume levels, the recorder may need a good quality pre-amp for the sound.
- **Wind noise** – If the conditions are windy, try standing upwind of the microphone. Could try holding an umbrella upwind. Do not attach the microphone to the umbrella handle because that would amplify the treble and you would lose some of the bass.
- **Rain** – To record in the rain, put the recorder in a Zip-Lock bag, and the microphone in another Zip-Lock bag. Will need a hole in the bag for the cord of each. Use duct tape to seal the hole for the cord. For the microphone, poke some holes in the end for the microphone. Bring along a towel to wick up the moisture.
- **Field testing** – Shake the microphone around in the air to get a sense of what kind of noise it picks up. This will also give you a sense of cable noise from shaking and moving the microphone around.

**Headphones:** A good set of headphones (around $100) is recommended, but a set of cheap headphones, around $20 may be sufficient for most purposes. It is very important to have headphones on at all times while recording. This gives you feedback about the quality of the sound, and lets you know if the power goes out, or memory runs out.

Sample audio/video equipment list for remote areas:

In 2008 and 2009, the following list of equipment was used Jeff McCormack for audio and video recording in San Salvador Island in the Bahamas. Brands, model names, and pricing may have changed since then.

• **Sony DCR-SR85** camcorder with 30 Gig hard drive, and the following accessories: (1) UV protector glass filter, (2) wide angle converter lens, (3) Sony NP-FH70 battery pack (two) and charger, (4) SanDisk Ultra II 4 Gig Memory Stick PRO Duo, and (5) Sony gun zoom microphone ECM-HGZ1. The wide angle converter lens and camera-mounted microphone are very important accessories. The wide angle lens is used in most recording situations.

• **Zoom H2** ultra-portable digital audio recorder with spare alkaline batteries.
• **Audio-Technica AU Pro 24** stereo condenser microphone.
• **External USB hard drive for transferring video from the camcorder.**
• **Canon Power Shot 2S IS** with combined digital and optical zoom = 60X. Also used for video and telephoto.
• Monopod – fast and easy set up for field photography and video where it is necessary to stabilize the camera.

• String – If you don’t want to carry a monopod or tripod, a six-foot piece of string can be used as a substitute in the field. One end of the string is connected to the bottom of the camera, and the other end is placed on the ground under one foot, and the camera is lifted up to pull the string tight. This is a simple way to reduce camera vibration when you need to travel light.

• Compact, folding umbrella and foam microphone covers to cut wind noise.

Recording Techniques

The following are some techniques to use and practice:

• **Adjust microphone volume:** When recording you will need to test and adjust the microphone volume. If you are outdoors, and it is windy, you may need a foam cover for the microphone.

• **Monitor the recording levels and battery charge:** When recording audio it is very important to be frequently monitoring the quality of the recording with a headset plugged into the recording device. This will give real-time feedback on the quality and sound level of the recording. During the interview, attention needs to be paid to the LED recording levels (light levels) on the device to check for audio distortion. Also keep an eye on the battery charge.

• **Video recording often requires an assistant:** When recording video, someone other than the interviewer should do the recording. With audio recording, the interviewer can do the recording without assistance, but with video recording, unless you have a lot of experience interviewing and recording at the same time, the results will be disappointing.

• **Framing the subject while zooming and panning:** When recording video, it is necessary to strike a delicate balance between staying zoomed in enough to focus attention on the subject, while staying zoomed out enough to capture hand gestures and possibly the reactions of other people talking with the interviewee. Amateur photographers are often too far away from the subject when taking a photograph, and the same problem can occur with video recording. Be constantly alert to possible changes in body movement that can cause the subject to be out of the range of view. Zoom slowly and smoothly. The same is true for panning. Sometimes the subject will move quickly out of the frame when turning or starting to walk, so when it seems that the subject is ready to change direction, make sure you are zoomed out enough so that you do not have to quickly adjust the zoom setting. Both zooming and panning can take some practice.

• **Recording in windy conditions:** When recording video outside in windy conditions, a directional microphone may be helpful. As in audio recording, monitoring the sound level with a headset is not only helpful, but essential for monitoring sound levels and wind noise. Once the wind velocity gets beyond 10 to 15 mph, wind noise can cause serious problems with the recording. If possible, try to find the leeward side of a building, hill, depression, or dense vegetation to cut wind noise.

Supplies and Preparation

Basic preparation:
• Put together a checklist of supplies and equipment needed, and check the list before going to the interview. This sounds obvious, but is important—nothing is worse than arriving at an interview without a needed piece of equipment.
• If you have not conducted an interview before, find someone to practice with. You’ll get some valuable feedback, especially on the quality of the audio or video.
• Be sure to test your equipment on the day of the interview and make sure that you have sufficient battery backup.

Interview Logistics: Setting the Stage

It is important to set the “stage” or room for the interview to be at its best:
• Try to avoid large rooms without many furnishings in order to avoid echo in the recordings.
• Set up the interview in an area of the room away from a fan, air conditioner, or noisy heating/cooling duct which can add undesirable background noise to the audio.
• Have good light in the room, natural or lamps, etc. (Good light helps to make one feel safe.) Make sure that the interviewee is situated in a location where bright sunlight will not be in the face when the sun angle changes. Draw the curtain or blind if necessary prior to the interview.
• When conducting a video interview make sure that there isn’t a window or bright light in the field of view of the camera.
• Put a note on the door (if applicable) that filming is in session: “Do Not Disturb – Recording in Progress.”
• Check your space before the interviewee arrives, so that it looks pleasing, clean and orderly. Don’t leave coffee cups about, or interview in an untidy place. This really does make a difference.
• Prior to the arrival of the interviewee, if possible, do a test recording in the interview space and play it back so that you are sure that the recording volume is appropriate and there is no background noise. Even if the interviewee is present it is best to do a quick test recording. The size and characteristics of the room, and distance between the interviewer and the interviewee can affect the volume and quality of the recording.
• Arrange for a place where you will not be interrupted. Turn off cell and landline phones.

Overview: Best Practices and Techniques

Clearly, the first thing an interviewer needs to do is to create an emotional environment of comfort and ease, and to foster a sense of trust.

Before engaging in video or audio-taping, a few minutes spent in making the interviewee feel completely comfortable is essential. A personal connection, a sense of understanding about how one might feel talking about themselves, and a genuine interest in the person helps to set the proper tone.

Once you have established friendly and comfortable contact, and the logistics have been set for the room, focus on the interview, and questions or concerns to be addressed. Then it will be a good time to start the interview. There is a delicate balance between too much pre-discussion and too little. Once you practice this, you will know when it feels like the correct time.
• Make sure that you arrive on time or a couple of minutes early. This is respectful for the interviewee, and also you want to make sure that you arrive relaxed.
• Be ready and prepared. Act as though you will be on stage and keep the focus directed on your subject, the interviewee.
• Be sure the interviewee has been properly informed of the purpose of the interview. Have the release form signed before you begin. Note: if someone later enters the room who has not signed the release form, pause the interview and stop the recording.
• Explain the project objectives and benefits.
• Know your script and what questions to ask before the interviewee arrives.
• Plan a variety of questions, as each question word elicits a different kind of response. For example: “What” (person, place, thing, or action), “Where” (place), “Who” (people), “When” (time – year, season of year, time of day), “Why” (reasons), “How” (process).
• Never start recording until the interviewee is ready to begin.
• Never record without his/her knowledge, and stop recording if he/she becomes tired, fatigued or upset with anything.
• When you start recording, begin the interview with a statement of the names of the participants, the date, and the location. Conclude each interview with a statement of gratitude, and keep a log of topics covered.
• Ask for examples.
• Ask for clarification.
• Rephrase statements into questions, or to rephrase to clarify a point.
• Prompt the interviewee. (“Is there anything else you can tell me about that?” “Can you tell me more?”)
• Confirm any facts.
• Ask open-ended, single-stranded, concrete questions. Example: “How did you learn about ...?”
• Invite the interviewee to consider bringing photos, scrapbooks, articles, objects, or anything else that might evoke memories and stories.
• The best entry point is one that follows the interviewee’s lead or one that sets the interviewee at ease, and helps to establish trust.
• Sometimes a good way to start is by asking some biographical information, as it is familiar territory for the interviewee. Some possibilities to consider (not all of the following may be relevant – depends on the oral history project goals):
  • Interviewee’s full name
  • Nickname, if any
  • City and state where interviewee resides
  • Date of birth (if they don’t mind the question)
  • Place of birth
  • How many years living in the community?
  • Where else lived?
  • Names of spouse and names of children, if any. Names of parents and grandparents, and where they were born. (Is it okay to disclose their names?)
  • Occupations, present and past?
  • Skills, and activities
  • Education
• Hobbies, interests, recreation, fun
• What was a typical day like for you when you were a young child? (An older child, etc.)

• Be prepared for not following the script. This may sound hard to do, but like a good conversation, it may flow naturally in the direction you want. Try not to be too controlling of the direction of the interview: it may lead to unexpected and good material. Controlling and not controlling the interview can be a balancing act—keeping in mind the project goals and amount of time available.

• Never contradict the interviewee. You are there as a “recorder” of the story. You are not there to argue or involve yourself, or offer unsolicited opinions. Do not let yourself get into a “conversation” during the recording or filming.

• Remember, this is not a two-way talk—you are trying to obtain as much pertinent information about this person’s experiences as you can, without tainting the interview with your own experiences, or changing the direction of their memories.

• Practice the previous point. It can be very difficult to quiet your own voice; however, in order to get a good “story” from your interviewee, you will have to restrain your own story.

• Be ready to ask the next question when the interviewee has come to a good stopping point. Consider any follow-up questions before moving to the next point.

• Once you have the basic interview questions covered, encourage the interviewee to tell any stories, even if the stories do not seem that important.

• Use active listening. Sometimes it is useful to repeat back to the interviewee some point that you are not certain about, or want to make sure the interviewee knows that he/she was heard.

• Watch body language. When interviewing elderly people especially, watch for signs of fatigue. Ask if they would like to take a break. When taking a break, turn off the recording, and when turning the recording back on, ask the interviewee if it is OK to start recording again.

• Be aware of ethical considerations. If an interviewee mentions another person by name during the interview, it is important later to make sure that the person named is comfortable about their information being public. For example: “John Doe was someone who drank too much.” That information needs to be edited out of the interview.

• Moving the dialog. Suppose your interviewee keeps on talking and it becomes less relevant to the question. Focus on how to move your subject to the next point.

• Keep a check on the time you have planned for this interview, and move along with your questions, even if you have to lose some questions in order to meet the objectives of time and relevance.

• Remember, you are not asking these questions to judge the subject in any way. Use care in crafting your tone and your questions, so that the subject never thinks you are critical.

• Most anthropologists will tell you that the most valuable results come in the last two weeks of work, or in the last hours of the interview, or when the interviewer or interviewee is about to leave the room with their hand on the door knob. “Door knob moments” may be revealing, so be open and welcoming of any stories that he/she wants to tell at the end of the interview.
Some Examples of Techniques (Sample Dialog)

Techniques for stopping points or moving to the next question:
- *Thank you, Joe, that was a good story. Now may we follow that line of thought.* (Ask a relevant question that came as product from the earlier story).
- *I’m happy to hear you speak about ......and* (the interviewer moves on to the next question).

Ending with:
- *We are very grateful that you were willing to share your story with us. Thank you for coming today. Is there anything you would like to add before we end the interview?*

- The following are questions or directive sentences that help transition from one question or story to another, especially if you feel it went on too long, or you want to abbreviate the story, or simply move on to the next subject to discuss:
  - *How did you respond to ...*
  - *Were you aware ...*
  - *How did it make you feel when ...*
  - *Would you want to follow the same path ...*
  - *I’m happy to hear this. And how did you handle ... or What do you think might have happened if ...*
  - *How would you continue ...*
  - *Could we come back to [the subject] of ...*
  - *Could we remember that point to come back to later ...*

Concluding the interview process

Thank the interviewee for his/her contributions, and reiterate how these contributions will be of benefit to people. Talk about the process you’ve undergone together. Remind the interviewee that he/she will have access to any publications or products of the interview, and if there are some aspects that the interviewee wants to remain private, state that those private conversations will remain private or the records will be destroyed.