

VOICES Oral History Archives

Welcome to the Voices Oral History Archives' Guide to Doing Oral History. This manual will help prospective oral history practitioners to design, plan, conduct, record and preserve oral history interviews. For more information, please email Voices@noaa.gov.

Voices Oral History Archives
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About Voices Oral History Archives

What We Do

Since 2003, the Voices Oral History Archives has been collecting, preserving and sharing oral history interviews of the human experience as it relates to our fisheries, oceans, and coasts. The program seeks to document the human experience of our marine, coastal, and Great Lakes environments. The database contains recordings and transcripts of eyewitness accounts from fishermen, their spouses, processing workers, shoreside business workers, scientists, marine resources managers, and others. These stories expand our knowledge and enrich our understanding of the nation's fisheries, connected ecosystems, and their impacts. We work with prospective oral history practitioners to add interviews to our growing digital repository and the public to use and interact with our content for educational and research purposes. The Voices Oral History Archives is a powerful resource available to the public to inform, educate, and provide primary information for researchers interested in our local, human experience with the surrounding marine environment.

History

In 2003, funding was provided by the NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Office of Science and Technology for the Local Fisheries Knowledge Pilot Project (PI, Dr. Susan Abbott-Jamieson). This project focused on training high school students to conduct oral history interviews with local fishermen and others in marine fishing-related industries to explore the connection between fisheries, the marine environment, and their communities. As part of the LFK Pilot Project, a database was created to provide a publicly accessible archive for these and other maritime related oral history interviews. In 2007, taking advantage of the infrastructure built for the LFK Project, a proposal for \$12,000 of seed funding was submitted to the NOAA Preserve America Grant Initiative, now the NOAA Heritage-Legacy Program, to expand the project scope to serve as a national archive. Initial steps included identifying and digitizing endangered collections. We formed critical partnerships during the early years with The Working Waterfront Festival (now New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center), Rutgers University and MIT SEA Grant. Over time, the Office of Science and Technology has supported the program with continued funding. Since 2003, the project has grown from 24 unique oral histories to over 1400 and growing.

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What is Oral History?

“Oral history refers both to a method of recording and preserving oral testimony and to the product of that process. It begins with an audio or video recording of a first person account made by an interviewer with an interviewee (also referred to as narrator), both of whom have the conscious intention of creating a permanent record to contribute to an understanding of the past. A verbal document, the oral history, results from this process and is preserved and made available in different forms to other users, researchers, and the public. A critical approach to the oral testimony and interpretations are necessary in the use of oral history.” -- Oral History Association

Oral history is the gathering of human experience through the process of interviewing. I like to think of oral history accounts as living, talking time-capsules of a whole human life. The recording includes the content of someone’s life - their family history, childhood, education, career, family life, etc. - and the context of their life, such as national and local historical movements and moments.

Life course interviews are the opportunity to hear about someone’s memories, stories, perspectives and interpretations in their voice, words and style. Oral historians should seek “felt-life” access to the people they interview. “Felt life” is a term borrowed from Henry James and refers to the most authentic understanding of another person. The oral history interview is the closest we can get to know, not just what happened, but what life felt like for the person we are interviewing. James says, “There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the ‘moral’ sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it.”

"Felt Life" is what we aim to capture as oral historians; not just what happened, what happened next, but what it all means to the narrator. According to Alessandro Portelli, oral history, therefore, tells us, “Not just what people did, but what they intended to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.”

The oral history interview is an opportunity to travel back in time with a narrator, have them take a look around and describe it for those who were not there and then. Oral history brings to life an experience that the general public and future scholars did not experience, but can more closely understand through the account.

What Makes Oral History Different?

“One of the two things that distinguish oral history from other disciplines is the search for a connection between biography and history, between individual experience and the transformations of society.” -- Allesandro Portelli

Oral history is narrative and has stylistic differences compared to other kinds of historical resources. What you read in a textbook sounds different. It does not contain the nuances of the human voice or the imperfections of how we tell stories. Oral History tells us less about events themselves than about their meaning. We may not get all the facts right or events in their proper order, but we can understand the impact it has had on the person we interview. Often, the details are lost, but the gist remains.

Allesandro Portelli, the Italian scholar and pioneer of oral history, wrote, “Oral sources are credible but with a different credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge.” He says the relationship between interviewer and interviewee should be considered as strengths rather than as weaknesses, because what other sources can convey feelings, impressions, memories, stories. This is what is so unique and valuable about oral history.

Again, oral history has a different kind of credibility. It is based on memory, which is shaped and changed by time, new experiences, and our unique perspectives. Do not let your interviewee worry or get hung up on details in terms of dates, spellings of names, etc. You’ll do plenty of research beforehand to be able to have a timeline or an opportunity to make those corrections during the transcription process. With oral history, we ask about what happened and when and what happened next, but we also really want to know what each moment, movement, and event felt like and the impact it had on the person we are interviewing.

Oral history has unique characteristics, distinguishing it from other primary sources. First, it comes to life. You can hear the emotion, expressions, and accent of the narrator. An interviewee may cry, laugh, or yell during the course of the interview. You can hear first-hand how the events of their life impact them. Also, the fragility of memory is apparent in some conversations. Often details are lost, but the gist, the meaning, remains. Third, the listeners and readers of the interview get to participate in a sensory experience, not one where we only hear the facts or the chronology of an event. Oral history brings to life an experience the user was not there for. Finally, oral history gives a voice to the voiceless. The motivation for many narrators to share their story is because there are so many from their community who cannot because they are no longer with us or their ability to remember is gone. When we lose someone, we lose their voice and their story. Their memories go with them, and the oral history interview is the opportunity to capture this while we can.

Purpose and Goals of Oral History

“Oral history should be a way to get a better history, a more critical history, a more conscious history which involves members of the public in the creation of their own history.” -- Ronald Grele

1. **Oral history serves as a source for information not already available.** Together, the narrator and interviewer are creating a primary source document that contains information not available in other formats.
2. **Oral history has “shared authority,” shared between interviewer and interviewee.** It is a joint effort. I like to say to an interviewee: I am the expert on recording and asking questions, but you are the expert on your own life.
3. **Oral history links present to past.** How else could we come close to comprehending the experiences of Holocaust survivors, migrant workers, World War II soldiers, and countless others, other than to hear the voices and stories of those who lived through history and that we are removed in time and space from?
4. **Oral history allows us to connect the experiences of ordinary people and place it in a broader historical context.** We are transported back in time and can experience history firsthand, which gives us a greater understanding of events and periods and a more complete historical record of the past.
5. **Oral history gives individuals a sense of belonging.** Conducting interviews with those that share a town and state with you will provide a strong sense of community, can give you new perspectives on the past, and bridge generations of people.
6. **Oral history allows us to tap directly into the human experience.** Oral history serves as a direct intervention to pervasive media consumption and social disconnection due to social media and increased screen time.
7. **There is an urgency to this type of work.** Many of the stories and memories captured in oral history recordings would be lost otherwise. Once we lose someone, we lose their voice and their ability to tell their story. People take their memories with them when they pass. We often wish we had conducted these kinds of life course interviews when it is too late; the person we want to hear from is no longer around, or their ability to remember is gone.
8. **Oral history makes the quiet voices loud.** It is an egalitarian platform that allows underrepresented populations to have their stories amplified and preserved.

Project Planning and Design

“It is a great privilege to record someone’s life story and a great responsibility to care for that story in a preservation environment ... Make informed choices and design a project that is right for you, but remember, it is not your story that is being recorded or archived. Most importantly, design a project that respects these life stories you will be collecting, curating, and disseminating.” -- Doug Boyd

Why are you doing this oral history interview or collection?

Determine the purpose and goals of each interview or collection of interviews. You should be able to answer the question, “Why are you interviewing this person/this group of people?” It is helpful to have a mission statement for a prospective project to help frame your research and develop your historical inquiry. This statement clarifies the project purpose and goals for potential interviewees, funders and repositories. The project statement should say why the prospective collection is valuable, urgent and suited to oral history methodology.

Develop a Project Timeline and Goals

What are the steps, goals, and outcomes? Determine at the outset about how many interviews, who to interview, who will be doing the interviews, what is the project budget, and how the interviews will be processed, preserved, delivered and shared. Interviewing is only one step in a multi-step, labor-intensive process. Take into account the research and preparation involved. You will want to familiarize yourself with any potential topics, experiences and movements covered in the project. For each individual interviewed, you will need to do further research on their unique background, education, career, and history. Decide how the interviews will be accessed and used? Will you transcribe the interviews? For every hour of audio, it takes at least four to six hours to transcribe, annotate and review. Will you publish the interviews online? In a book? A podcast series? An exhibit? A performance? What is your storage strategy? You are responsible for the preservation of these precious materials. Which repository is the right fit for your content? Will you make the audio or the transcript available? Or both? Assemble a team and coordinate efforts. Make sure your timeline and project scope is realistic.

Training

Properly train the project team in oral history methodology and recording technique. It is crucial that the interviews are both research-rich and recorded professionally. Additionally, participants should be aware of the legal and ethical issues involved in doing oral history. An excellent place to start is the Oral History Association’s “Statement on Ethics.” (<https://www.oralhistory.org/oha-statement-on-ethics/>)

Research and Preparation

“The bulk of your work should be behind you before you ask your first question.”

-- Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*

Before the interview, conduct whatever background research is needed. Prepare questions, make arrangements with the interviewee and familiarize yourself with the equipment. Thorough research is crucial to a successful interview. It gives an interviewer credibility and authority and tells the narrator you care and are interested. A well-informed interviewer puts the interviewee at ease, directs the flow of the conversation and allows for opportunities of unexpected exploration. I love when an interviewee says, “How did you know that?” This means they are impressed, and trust and rapport can begin to develop. What follows is unrehearsed memory. They are starting to make sense of the events of their life, making connections to wider historical narratives and reflecting on what it all means.

When possible, a pre-interview survey is a good place to start. The survey is an opportunity to gather information on your prospective interviewee and will help direct your pre-interview research. Here, the interviewee can include information on family background, growing up, education, career, family life, and other biographical information. It is also helpful to add a section for the narrator to include additional experiences to discuss in the interview. It tells you what is important to the narrator and may be something that the survey does not ask about. I also always encourage prospective interviewees to send along their résumé, news clippings, etc., and/or include additional information on a separate sheet of paper. Use the information on the survey to do further research. For example, I want to know as much as possible about the narrator’s immigration and family history, how their family came to settle in a particular area, what were the driving forces for migration and how they adjusted to life in a new country. You want to understand the nature, characteristics, and timelines of the significant people, places, and events of someone’s life. For example, it is a missed opportunity to interview someone who attended the University of Texas at Austin in 1966 and not know to ask about the infamous tower shooting, its impact, and aftermath.

When I interview lawyers, I review their case histories and decisions. When I talk to a military veteran, I ask for a copy of their DD214 and find a command chronology for their unit’s service. Resources such as digital newspaper archives, LinkedIn, and personal blogs can be helpful sources to discover more information on the subject and your narrator.

Additionally, listen back to your first interview closely for items for further research and follow-up. Finally, do not feel you need to generate a questionnaire necessarily or go in chronological order during the course of the interview. I show up to interviews with a long list of topics that I want the narrator to tell me more about. That list evolves and changes as the conversation unfolds. I will cross out items that they covered without my asking, and I will scribble things down that I want to follow up on later so I do not interrupt the flow of conversation.

Interviewing

“99% of what the interviewee does share should be accepted as an honest if not a wholly accurate account of what transpired. Experience has shown that the stronger the rapport between interviewer and interviewee, the richer the return in terms of source material.”

-- John A. Neuenschwander in *The Oral History Review*, Vol.6

Before the interview, inform the interviewee of what to expect, what the scope and nature of the project are, why they are a great person to talk to, how long it might take and what you expect for the interview setting (quiet, uninterrupted and preferably just the two of you). You do not want an audience. There are some things someone won't talk about if they have their spouse or child there in the room. You do not want your narrator to censor themselves or protect their families by not talking about the tough stuff. Of course, if the interviewee is more comfortable with a family member present or a family member insists on being there, that is fine. Again, It is a balance of comfort for the interviewee and attention to interview quality. You want to accommodate your interviewee as much as possible and put them at ease, but ideally without compromising the integrity of the recording.

The interviewee will want to know how long it will take. There are no hard and fast rules about this. I have spent entire weekends recording with someone, and I have done interviews under an hour. Set aside an hour or two, but be prepared to stay longer or leave earlier. The time will ultimately depend on the interviewee, their energy level, their ability to remember, and their schedule. I once interviewed someone for nine hours in a row. I also once interviewed a World War II veteran with declining health twelve times for thirty minutes at a time because he would start to mentally and physically slow down around that point.

It is always a good idea to let someone know where you are going to be and who with. Almost every interview I have conducted has been a good experience with a pleasant person, but the interviewer and interviewee are likely strangers before the conversation, and each can feel vulnerable in the new relationship.

You want the interviewee to know what to expect without being overly prepared. I discourage interviewers from sending their questionnaires ahead of time because then the interviewee prepares all their responses and the interview is full of canned answers and rehearsed memory. When narrators recite their responses, it sounds inauthentic and mechanical. Also, if they are reading from a paper, paper handling sounds are magnified into a microphone creating disruptive interference. You can certainly send prospective narrators topics you want to touch on or areas to explore, and this will help bring old memories up to the front. You can even suggest they look at pictures, articles, journals, and evidence of the event or period in question, but there should not be a “show and tell” during the interview. Again, you risk rehearsed memory, the stories or explanations they have provided many times before in the same way. Your job is to elicit new responses, rich memories, and fresh reflections.

On-site, at the interview, do a quick recon of the space. You want it to be as private as possible and possess little to no background noise. Turn off the television, air conditioner (unless you and the narrator become uncomfortable) and limit any other extraneous and intrusive sounds. It is okay to say, “Can I unplug this? Turn this off?” You are the sound and interview expert. They will appreciate your professional approach. It will let your interviewee know that you do not want anything to distract from the telling and hearing of their story.

You want your interviewee to be comfortable, but not so comfortable that they are going to lean way back in their chair and get far away from the microphone. Do not be afraid to move the microphone for volume control. Move the microphone in for whispering and back out for loud laughter or shouting.

When the time for the interview comes, you can’t just walk into someone’s home, begin recording and start asking heavy-hitting and controversial questions. You are a stranger, and you are there to hear their life story and make it publicly available. This is the warming up stage of the interview process. Spend some time to chat. Tell them a little bit about who you are, why you are interested in this project, but not too much about yourself that the narrator starts to feel that they aren’t the subject here.

In *Telling True Stories*, Isabel Wilkerson outlines seven stages to the interview process, listed below. She says, “If we want people to tell us what’s really on their minds, we need to make sure we do not give up before the seventh phase.”

1. Phase One: Introduction
2. Phase Two: Adjustment
3. Phase Three: Moment of Connection
4. Phase Four: Settling In
5. Phase Five: Revelation
6. Phase Six: Deceleration
7. Phase Seven: Reinvigoration

For audio interviews, producer Jay Allison advises reporters to “remind your interviewee that you are not a film crew.” Being on-camera can be intimidating and inhibiting for subjects. Tell your interviewees you merely want to record a conversation. The digital recorder will quickly disappear into the background soon after you begin.

When you begin the interview, remember to ask open-ended questions. You do not want to elicit a series of yes’s and no’s from your interviewee. Remember the question “why.” I also love “Tell me more about ...”

Ask one question at a time. When you ask a series of questions at once, you risk some not being addressed or fully answered. You can sometimes rephrase a question. Sometimes the first way you ask a question won’t jar the memory of your interviewee, but rewording it can help work out the response.

Two techniques used in oral history interviewing are the “two-sentence” and the “reverse” question. The two-sentence is when the first sentence gives the interviewee a brief background of why your question is important and the second asks the question. The reverse is used to turn the perspective in a different direction. It is sometimes important to know why someone didn’t do something.

Let the narrator set his or her own pace. Do not finish their sentences or hurry them along during parts that are boring or you feel is irrelevant. It is not boring or irrelevant to your interviewee. Just like they are telling you their story the unique way they lived and saw it, they get to tell you in their unique style.

Practice self-care. It is hard work to absorb and do active listening while figuring out where the conversation will go next. It takes a lot out of you. You are absorbing a whole life story and you will walk away feeling pretty mentally and emotionally exhausted. Try not to schedule more than one interview in a day. You probably won’t have the energy for interview number two. Also, you never know how long your first interview will take. I have done interviews that were several hours long. I have also had interviews end earlier, but then stayed to have lunch or go for a walk with the person I have interviewed. This means a lot to the narrator.

Learn techniques to jog the narrator’s memories. Go into the interview knowing enough things about the interviewee that you can have them comment on specific events and achievements, but make sure you still have them fill you in on all the details. Anticipate a range of audiences for the oral history, from students to foreigners, who may not be familiar with all of the topics discussed.

Unless your interviewee has problems remembering the past, do not use props such as photo albums, diaries or other items that are difficult to translate for the recording. The listener or the researcher cannot see the photograph when accessing the oral history interview and won’t understand what is being discussed. You risk getting rehearsed memory when looking at pictures or other materials on the recording. They will describe the photos the way they have to others before. You need to get them beyond rehearsed memory. If the narrator is having trouble with his or her memory, only then it might be helpful to jog their memory with photos. You can ask around the photograph to get beyond rehearsed memory: “What were you doing the day this photo was taken?” “Who took this photo?” “What do you remember about the day it was taken?” “Why was this an important moment to capture?” Those may draw out responses they have not given before.

Your job is to enable the narrator to paint as broad a picture of their life as possible. Elicit emotions. Aim for felt-life access to the people they interview. This is a living, talking time capsule of a whole human life that you are in charge of creating.

The next item is to be quiet. This is oral history 101. Someone listening to or transcribing the interview can only hear one voice at a time. Radio host and interviewer, Faith Salie explains:

“Acknowledgements such as ‘uh-huh,’ ‘I know,’ ‘mm-hmm,’ ‘yes!’ all serve to express, ‘I am listening, and I am with you.’ And off air that’s a lovely impulse and conducive to conversation, but it turns out to be really distracting to listen to on the radio. Be judicious in giving voice to encouragement. Let your guests know you are listening not by making ‘listening sounds’ but by letting what they are saying lead organically to your next question ... Resist the urge to fill the void. You are not a hostess at a dinner party; you are a midwife to a story. If you allow a moment to suspend (and this can feel like an eternity), you’ll often be amazed at what an interviewee will reveal.”

Verbal tics are distracting, disruptive, and intrusive. It sounds like you are hurrying them along and disrupts the flow of what the narrator is saying. It can make you sound impatient as an interviewer. If you insert a solid “mm-hmm” into every narrator’s pause, natural or dramatic, you are taking away from whatever the interviewee is saying. The recording is among the last living evidence of the interviewee, and their family does not want to hear the interviewer.

Interviewer verbal tics are less problematic if you do not expect anyone to hear the audio, but that is becoming less the case as we move towards the recording as the record of access. More and more, programs excerpt and publish their audio. Also, participants look forward to receiving a copy of their interview CD or MP3 and sharing it with others, and again, family members do not want to hear interviewer noises and interruptions throughout their loved one's story.

Interviewer verbal tics make using the interview beyond the transcript impossible. Currently, oral historians are adopting the recording standards of public radio: WAV files, 44.1/16, close microphone placement, professional recorders and gear, interviews in a quiet place and no extraneous sounds. The recordings of the people you document should be clear and warm, not cold and distant and disrupted by interviewer noises. Listen back to your interviews and figure out what your verbal tics are and work to eliminate them.

Also, your silence gives the interviewee room to stretch out what they have to say. My motto is: embrace the awkward silence. Ask a question. Have them respond. Wait. They will continue to talk. They will want to fill in that awkward silence with more information. While they give you their first response, which they may have lined up, their brain is doing work to revisit that topic or memory and they will say things like, “Well, come to think of it ...” or, “You know, I never realized how I felt about ...” The interview is an improvisation. If you have your next question lined up too quickly or stick too rigidly to your questionnaire, you will miss opportunities to expand or explore organically. The trick is to know where you are heading, but be prepared and open to ending up somewhere else.

It is a balance of being emotionally responsive without interrupting. Learn to laugh silently, which feels funny at first, but will be worth it on the recording. Isabel Wilkerson writes about this. She says, “I do everything I can to make my subjects feel comfortable enough to talk with me. I try to be a great audience. I nod; I look straight

into their eyes; I laugh at their jokes, whether I think they are funny or not. I am serious when they are serious.”

Do not challenge your interviewee, even if you do not agree with them or think what they are saying is true. This is their version of their life. Oral histories are wonderfully slippery in this way. The recording is not a textbook. Each oral history interview falls somewhere on the spectrum between mostly truthful and a total lie. There are too many issues with memories – how they are formed and how they are stored – to be an authority on someone else’s. You could interview four people on what they remember about a particular shared event and get four entirely different perspectives.

Pursuing things in detail is important. Again, you will have to go beyond rehearsed memory - what they have said before and the stories they have lined up. Ask questions that are going to elicit honest emotional reactions or illustrate a story. Give voice to the inner conflict and look for moments of realization. Ask for examples.

- Could you tell me more about ...?
- What does it feel like to ...?
- Tell me the story of ...
- Describe to me ...
- What was that like?
- What do you make of that?

If the narrator strays into non-pertinent areas, let them go. I have heard the opposite in some oral history training, but in my experience, what you think is a tangent turns out to be revealing or at least important to the person you are talking to. If you do feel like they are going way off track, gently bring them back. Do this gently, so they do not feel offended that what they are telling you about their life, which you came to learn about, is off topic. You do not want them wondering if they are doing the oral history “right.”

To create that rich picture have them describe people. Just like in movies, character development is essential. Clarify dates, and names of people and places. This helps orient the conversation, the interviewee’s memory and will be useful to later users of the interview. Try to establish where the narrator was in a particular story or time in their life. It is important for you to have a timeline, but this becomes crucial for potential researchers.

Wrap the interview up at a reasonable time. If your interviewee is starting to struggle at all – they are hungry, tired, slowing down, struggling to remember – say, “I think this is a good place to stop today and pick up the next time.” But do not leave too abruptly. This person just gave you their life story and made you the caretaker of their memories. Stay and look at their pictures, have lunch, chat.

After the interview, thank them. Interviewees have handed over their most precious memories and stories. You are holding their life story in your digital recorder. Thank them. Schedule another interview, if you need to, as soon as you both are able. Remember: as long as you hit record and are intellectually curious, there is no wrong way to interview.

Sound Recording

“What I bring to the interview is respect. The person recognizes that you respect them because you are listening. Because you are listening, they feel good about talking to you.” -- Studs Terkel

My big push in the field of oral history is to urge practitioners to pay as much attention to content as to sound quality. Good technical quality and good interviews are of equal importance. Poor sound quality precludes access and use. Oral historians need to adopt the standards of public radio. This means using professional equipment, having close mic placement, sound-checking with headphones, good acoustics, and no extraneous interviewer noises. Interviews are easier to transcribe, excerpt, and share if recorded well. It honors the story of the person you are interviewing if recorded warmly, closely and crisply. It is embarrassing to turn over a recording that sounds terrible, and it is so avoidable. As much attention should be paid to the questions we are asking and the content we are creating as to the medium we record these memories and stories on.

Podcasts have become a popular way for oral historians to feature their stories, share bite-sized portions of their work. It is a great opportunity to have the content reach broader and more diverse audiences. It gives our collections longer lives and a broader geographic and demographic scope. Our interviews become more flexible and versatile if shared in this way. It is also a great way to get reacquainted with your collection and the stories in it. But if oral historians are not appropriately trained in sound recording techniques, podcast pieces won't be a successful way to highlight our essential work.

1. **Practice.** Familiarize yourself with the recorder. The more professional and relaxed you appear, the more at ease the interviewee will be. Record test audio, listen back and see how it sounds. Adjust your levels, sitting arrangements and microphone position accordingly.
2. **Double check and test out your recording gear before you go in the field.** Set your levels, fill out paperwork, gather information on your interviewee, and soundcheck with headphones. You could do the best interview of your life, but if you have one switch in the wrong place or plug in the wrong hole, it will be useless.
3. **If there is a problem, do not do the interview.** If something goes wrong with the recording and you have to tell someone you wasted their time or the sound quality is crummy, It is embarrassing and time-consuming to redo the interview. It is also an enormous waste of time for the interviewee. You lose credibility with the interviewee, and if he or she agrees to a second interview, it won't be as good as the first.
4. **Figure out how to inconspicuously monitor your levels, battery power and time during an interview.** You want to make sure everything is

recording and running correctly, but without your interviewee thinking you are bored or unsure of your equipment. Once in a while, during recording, check to see that the timer is counting seconds, so you know you are recording and not in record-pause or stopped.

5. **The best equipment is the equipment you are comfortable with.** But try to get comfortable with professional, high-quality digital recorders.
6. **Be alert to factors that will improve or distract from good sound quality.** Do not be afraid to explain to your interviewee the kind of sounds you want to avoid or the types of rooms that are not conducive to recording, like large or empty rooms. Interview away from hard surfaces. It is better to sit next to someone than across, especially if you are sharing a microphone. If you only have one microphone, have it favor the interviewee. You will know to speak loudly and clearly. You do not want to be right next to a wall or sitting across a desk if you can avoid it. Do not be afraid to suggest a different space, rearrange some furniture or encourage your interviewee to speak up and closer to the microphone. You are the boss of the recording; they are the boss of their story.
7. **Power off all cell phones.** Do not just turn the volume off. When a cell phone rings, even on silent or vibrate, it will show up on the recording as interference that you cannot erase. A phone call could obstruct your best piece of tape.
8. **Omnidirectional, dynamic mics are great for general recording.** They are good for noise rejection from the sides and rear. Most digital recorders have internal omnidirectional mics. I usually advise against internal mics and suggest an external mic with cable, but recorders such as the Zoom H6, Marantz PMD 561, and Tascam DR-100, have impressive internal microphone quality. The drawback is handling sounds, so use your tripod or boom stand, and avoid touching the recorder during the interview.
9. **Keep memory cards and recorders away from metal, magnets, heat, humidity & sunlight.**
10. **Dump, convert, back up and process your audio immediately.**
11. **Ingredients for good sound:**
 - a. **Good room acoustics.** The smaller the room, the better. Avoid doing interviews in large or outdoor spaces, like churches, auditoriums or parks. You want a small area with as little ambient sound as possible
 - b. **Sound absorption.** You want soft, absorptive surfaces. Try sitting on couches in the living room as opposed to across from each other at the kitchen table. You will both be more comfortable and the tape will sound better. Avoid table stands. This means the microphone is not necessarily close to the source of someone's voice. It is reflecting off the hard surface that it sits on, and it is susceptible to interviewee interference - playing with it, tapping the table.

- c. Good microphone placement.** You want to place or hold the microphone as close to source's face as possible (about six to twelve inches away) positioned a little off to the side to avoid p-pops. You could also get a foam cover or p-pop filter if that is something you are worried about. Your options for mic placement are strong arms (hold out microphone), a boom stand, or, in rare instances, a cooperative interviewee who can be trusted to do his or her own mic placement and they hold it themselves. This is risky and should be only be done with an interviewee that you are comfortable with.
- d. Avoid lavalier microphones.** The placement of a lavalier is not ideal. You would not hold a microphone in front of an interviewee's chest when it could be in front of their mouth. You give up volume control with lavalier microphones, which are also more sensitive to room sounds and will pick up lots of mic-handling sounds from the clothing they are attached to.
- e. Good gain.** Make sure your input gain is in a good range, not too quiet and not loud. Most digital recorders allow multi-channel processing. This is your mixer and so you should be doing real-time volume control at the moment of recording. You want to get good sound up front instead of trying to manufacture better sound during production. You cannot boost only the sound you want. If you bring up the voice, it brings up room and ambiance. So, monitor your gain and volume as you record. Gain is volume into the recorder, adjusted with your input sound and levels. Volume is sound out of the recorder, changed with the volume up and down knobs.
- f. Record in WAV.** Record in WAV, as opposed to MP3. This is so important. WAV is an uncompressed, flexible audio file format designed to store any combination of sampling rates or bitrates. WAV is the archival standard for sound recordings. WAV is uncompressed, like a high-resolution photograph. It is not the same to record in MP3 and convert to WAV. You are going to do a lot with this audio after it is recorded and you do not want to lose quality, so working with a lossless, uncompressed file format is best.

Again, oral historians need to adopt the recording standards of public radio. Our interviews, which can end up in podcasts, exhibits, and on the radio, need to sound good as much as they need to capture great stories. There is no excuse for bad "tape" anymore. Oral history is capturing the living voices of people in a way that the written word cannot convey. The tape recording itself is an original historical document, so it is important to record the best quality document that you can. If recorded well, the interview becomes more flexible as a research tool.

Legal & Ethical Concerns

“We seek to redefine oral history as a humanistic and processual methodology: one centered on the humanity of two human beings with different cultural and social backgrounds, and which considers the interview as intrinsically affected by what happens before, during, and after the interview.” -- Andrea Hajek and Sofia Serenelii

Before embarking on an oral history project, it is important to understand what is at stake for you, the interviewee and the audience. Until recently, oral history research was subject to Institutional Review Board approval to protect the “rights and welfare of human subjects.” Oral historians think of interviewees not as “subjects,” but as co-creators, co-authors, and expert eyewitnesses. Still, oral history practitioners have legal and ethical objections to their narrator and their life story.

The Oral History Association’s “Principles and Best Practices” page should be a first stop for understanding the complex legal and ethical issues involved in oral history documentation and preservation. (<https://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices-revised-2009/>)

A second useful resource is John Neuenschwander's *A Guide to Oral History and the Law*. Below is a list of key points from this book that will guide your practice and understanding of the rules of doing oral history.

What is owed the interviewee?

- Respect their point of view.
- Respect them as a person. Do not patronize or misrepresent.
- Be honest with them about the project, its goals, and how the material will be used.
- Respect their wishes concerning any restrictions.
- Acknowledge the value of their contribution, and treat the material as valuable.

What is owed to other scholars?

- A clear record with good documentation
- As complete a record as possible
- Accuracy
- A record that can be used (no missing releases or documentation)

Shared Authority: The interviewer and the interviewee are collaborators; one controls the structure of the interview, and the other controls the content.

Releases and Deeds of Gift

- Be precise, but avoid overly legalistic language
- Provide a road map to future use and administration

Elements of a Release

- Prefatory language
- Future use clause
 - “I understand that all materials produced from this interview, whether in tape, manuscript, electronic, film, digital or any other form will be used only for research, educational, web, exhibition, program presentation and promotional purposes by [the oral history program] or its public.”
- Transfer of copyright
- Restrictions
- Signatures of both interviewees and interviewer

Defamation

- The dead cannot be defamed.
- Organizations have reputations.
- Public figures bear a heavier burden.
- Pure opinion is not defamatory (unless facts are implied).

Elements of Defamation

- False and defamatory statement concerning another
- Unprivileged publication to a third party
- Fault amounting at least to negligence on the part of the publisher
- Either actionability of the statement irrespective of special harm or existent of special harm caused by the publication

Major Categories of Defamation

- Commission of a crime
- Acting immorally or unethically
- Associating with unsavory people
- Financial irresponsibility
- Professional incompetency

Privacy

- False light
- Public disclosure of private facts

Public Disclosure of Private Facts

- Embarrassing private facts disclosed
- Facts disclosed to the general public
- Facts are highly offensive to a reasonable person
- Facts relate to matters that are not of a legitimate public concern

Preservation and Access

An oral history's value is in its access and use. Creating the interview is one step, but preserving and making available that interview is a necessary second step. Be sure to have a preservation plan in place. Immediately save, convert and store your interviews in different physical and digital environments to ensure its protection. Determine a file management system and stick to it. It helps to have consistent file management system for naming the documents (audio, transcript, supplementary materials, release form) with no spaces in the document name. For example, bohan_james_12February2019. Spaces in the file name can create problems later for portability, downloading, migration, and uploading.

Every interview should start with an introduction that tells you about the interview in case associated or supplementary documentation is lost. For example, "This is an interview with Patricia Pinto da Silva on February 27, 2019. The interview is being conducted in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. The interviewer is Molly Graham." This is also an opportunity to say a little about the project, if you wish.

Save your audio file to a hard drive or cloud storage that is regularly backed up. Save both the original WAV recording and converted MP3 copy of the interview to an archival data disk. If you lose the digital copy or it becomes corrupted, you have a backup. Additionally, print a physical copy of the transcript, or several copies to be shared locally, with the narrator and with a physical repository. Also, save a digital copy of the transcript, in both PDF and DOC formats, preferably.

The participants should receive a CD or MP3 copy of their interview and a copy of the transcript, along with a thank you letter for their time, participation and contribution to the historical record.

Then, determine how the interview will be accessed and whether or not you will transcribe the interview. Transcription makes your research more discoverable. The contents can be keyword searched, quoted, cited and shared. Do you want to create a website? Do you want to make just the audio or just the transcript available, or both? Is there a repository with a collection scope that your work falls into and deposit there?

To explore more ideas and issues on access, the following link contains articles that discuss this topic further:

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/category/accessing/>

Appendix: Sample Invitation Letter

June 12, 2019

Dear ----

I would like to invite you to participate in an oral history interview as part of NOAA's Voices Oral History Collection. Since 2003, the Voices Oral History Archives has been collecting, preserving and sharing oral history interviews of the human experience as it relates to our fisheries, oceans and coasts. To date, we have collected over 1,400 interviews, which are available for students, researchers and the general public on our website (voices.nmfs.noaa.gov).

Our program has been working closely with the Maine Lobstermen's Community Alliance. They strongly recommended that we get in touch with you to record your unique perspective on the history and experiences on the coast of Maine.

Interviews are recorded in digital audio using high-quality recorders. A basic transcript is produced, then, reviewed for accuracy by a Voices staff member. The material discussed in the interview is verified and clarified through annotations to the greatest extent possible. You will then have the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and to ensure that no harmful or embarrassing material is made public. Your interview is kept confidential until you agree to its release. Depending upon your wishes, the completed transcript may be withheld from immediate public release or may be released in an abridged version. You will receive copies of both the recordings and final transcripts.

All material approved for release will become part of the Voices Oral History Archives' public collection. The public collection is made available through the Voices website (voices.nmfs.noaa.gov).

I have attached our pre-interview survey. Please fill it out to the degree you feel comfortable and return it at your convenience. Once we receive your survey, we can begin planning for your interview session. In addition, feel free to add a résumé, news clippings, etc., and/or include additional information on a separate sheet of paper.

Simply call my office or respond to this letter to start the scheduling process.

My colleagues and I look forward to interviewing you. If you have any questions about the interview process, please feel free to contact me at (207) 807-0109.

Sincerely,
Molly Graham,
Voices Oral History Archives
molly.graham@noaa.gov

Appendix: Pre-interview Questionnaire

VOICES ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

molly.graham@noaa.gov

www.Voices.NMFS.NOAA.gov

207-807-0109

PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for taking the time to complete this extensive survey. Please answer as many of the following questions as you feel comfortable completing. Feel free to add any additional information that you think will help the interviewer prepare for your interview on a separate sheet.

Name: _____

Current Address: _____

Telephone Number(s): _____

Cell Phone: _____

Email Address: _____

Date of Birth: _____ Place of Birth: _____

FAMILY HISTORY

Father's Name: _____

Place/Year of Birth: _____

Place/Year of Death: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Highest level of education: _____

Father's Occupational History: _____

Father's Religious Affiliation: _____

Father's Political Affiliation: _____

Father's Military Service: _____

Mother's Name: _____

Place/Date of Birth: _____

Place/Date of Death: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Education (check highest level of education): _____ none _____ elementary _____ high school

_____ college _____ graduate school. If your mother attended college, please list name of the school and

date of graduation: _____

Mother's Occupational History: _____

Mother's Religious Affiliation: _____

Mother's Political Affiliation: _____

Mother's Military Service: _____

Date and Place of Parents' Marriage: _____

Please list the names of your siblings, dates of birth and highest level of education attained. (Please list name of school and date of graduation, if possible.) _____

Did other close relatives serve in the military? If so, please give details: _____

YOUR EDUCATION

Elementary School – name(s), location(s), and years of attendance: _____

High School and/or Technical/Professional School – name(s), location(s), and years of attendance: _____

Undergraduate – name(s), location(s), and years of attendance: _____

Major(s): _____

Scholarships Held: _____

Greek Organization: _____

Athletic Teams: _____

Clubs: _____

Were you a member of the ROTC or other military training course? _____

If so, for how many years? _____ Did you receive a commission? _____

Graduate School(s) – name(s), location(s), and years of attendance: _____

If you are a veteran, did you use the GI Bill for any part of your education? Please explain. _____

Other educational experiences to include in the interview: _____

YOUR CAREER & LIFE EXPERIENCES

Occupational History (Please list by date, in reverse chronological order, including positions held): _____

Areas of interest/research/expertise: _____

Did you ever run for and/or hold political office? Please explain: _____

Were/are you involved in any social, cultural and/or political movements? Please explain: _____

YOUR FAMILY (IF APPLICABLE)

Spouse's/Partner's Name: _____

Spouse's/Partner's Place/Date of Birth: _____

Spouse's/Partner's Education (check highest level of education): _____none _____elementary _____high school _____college _____graduate school. If your spouse/partner attended college, please list name of school and date of graduation: _____

Spouse's/Partner's Occupational History (Please list by date, in reverse chronological order, including positions held):

Date/Place of Marriage: _____

Number of children ____ Please give names of your children, date of birth, level of education attained. Please also include name of school(s) and date of degree(s), if possible:

Family Experiences and stories to include in the interview: _____

ADDITIONAL EXPERIENCES TO INCLUDE IN THE INTERVIEW

Please mail or email the completed pre-interview questionnaire to:

Voices Oral History Archives
Attn: Molly Graham, Director
10 Johnson Road
Scarborough, Maine 04074
Department of History
207-807-0109
molly.graham@noaa.gov

Appendix: Sample Voices Release

To be completed by both interviewee(s) and interviewer(s):
(In cases of oral history interviews of deceased persons, to be completed by donor of the material)

I, _____, residing at _____ am a participant in the Voices Oral History Archives Project (hereinafter "VFFP") of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA/NMFS). Recording tape(s) resulting from oral history interview sessions conducted on _____ (date) at _____ (location), as part of the Voices Oral History Archives. I understand that the purpose of the VFFP is to collect audio- and video-recorded oral histories of the United States of America and its territories' commercial, recreational, and subsistence fishermen and women, and those who support them, as well as selected related documentary materials such as photographs for inclusion in the Voices Oral History Archives Database (hereinafter "VFF DB"). The VFF DB is housed on NOAA/NMFS servers and will be accessible to the public through a website. These oral histories and related materials serve as a record of the Nation's commercial, recreational, and subsistence fisheries and as a scholarly and educational resource for NOAA and the general public.

I understand that NOAA/NMFS plans to retain the product of my participation in the VFFP in digital form, including but not limited to my interview, presentation, video, photographs, statements, name, images or likeness, voice, and written materials ("My Collection") as part of its permanent collections in the VFF Database.

I hereby grant to NOAA/NMFS ownership of the physical property comprising My Collection. Additionally, I hereby grant to NOAA/NMFS, at no cost, the perpetual, nonexclusive, transferable, worldwide right to use, reproduce, transmit, display, perform, prepare derivative works from, distribute, and authorize the redistribution of the materials in MY Collection in any medium. By giving this permission, I understand that I retain any copyright and related rights that I may hold.

I hereby release NOAA and its assignees and designees, from any and all claims and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of My Collection, including but not limited to any claims for copyright infringement, defamation, invasion of privacy, or right of publicity.

Should any part of My Collection be found to include materials that NOAA/NMFS deems inappropriate for retention with the collection or for transfer to other collections in NOAA/NMFS, NOAA/NMFS may dispose of such materials in accordance with its procedures for disposition of materials not needed for NOAA's collections.

I hereby state that I am of legal age and competent to sign this release. I agree that this release shall be binding on me, me legal representatives, heirs, and assigns. I have read this release form and am fully aware of its contents.

ACCEPTED AND AGREED

Interviewee Name _____

Interviewee Signature _____ Date _____

Name of Interviewer _____

Interviewer Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix: Life-Course Interview Question Guide

This question guide is not prescriptive. This is a general format for life-course oral history interviewing. Many more questions may be added depending on the individual, their experiences and your research. Also, many of the following questions may not be relevant for the interviewee. The interview is a spontaneous, non-linear experience. Be prepared to jump around in the chronology and follow up on ideas that need to be explored more fully.

This is an interview with [interviewee's name]. The interview is taking place on [date] in [city, state]. The interviewer is [interviewer's name].

- When and where were you born?
- Trace moves between places and dates.
- Reasons for moves.
- Family history on mother's side.
 - Immigration history
 - Grandparents' names, country of origin, occupation, any stories, describe him/her
- Family History on father's side
 - Immigration history
 - Grandparents' names, country of origin, occupation, any stories, describe him/her
- Were you close to your grandparents?
- Where did they live?
- Other relatives of the older generation?
 - Was anyone influential to you?
- Parents - Father
 - Where was your father born?
 - What do you know about his childhood?
 - Describe what he was like.
 - What was your relationship like with him?
 - Is he still alive?
 - What kinds of things did he teach you?
 - What did he do for a living?
 - What kinds of things did you do together?
 - Political affiliation?
 - Religious affiliation?
- Parents - Mother
 - Where was your mother born?
 - What do you know about her childhood?
 - Describe what she was like.
 - What was your relationship like with her?
 - Is she still alive?
 - What kinds of things did she teach you?
 - What did she do for a living?
 - What kinds of things did you do together?
 - Political affiliation
 - Religious affiliation?
- How did your parents meet?
 - What was their relationship like?
 - How many years married?

- What did they like to do for fun?
- Tell me about your siblings.
 - Names and birthdates.
 - Can you remember when they were born?
 - How did you get along?
 - What kinds of things would you do together?
 - How have their lives unfolded?
- Family vacations?
- Family traditions?
- Tell me about your extended family.
 - Relationship with cousins, aunts, uncles, etc.
 - Memories
 - Family reunions
 - Holidays
 - Vacations
 - Weddings
 - How would you stay in touch with one another?
- Describe the house you grew up in.
- What was the neighborhood like?
 - Did neighbors live close by?
- What were your responsibilities in the home?
- Did your family own the home?
- Did you share a room with anyone?
- Tell me about your friends growing up.
 - What would you do for fun?
 - What kinds of games did you play?
- Tell me about the town you grew up in.
- Did you attend church as a child?
 - What kind of church/religion?
 - How did you feel about attending church services?
- Did you discuss politics in the home?
- Did you have a part-time job growing up?
- Tell us about your education and schooling.
 - Elementary School
 - Middle School
 - High School
 - Favorite teachers
 - Favorite subjects
 - Favorite activities
 - Sports
 - When did you graduate?
 - Plans for after graduation?
 - Did you date?
 - What would you do for fun?
 - Did your parents encourage you to do well in school?
- Tell me about the College/University you attended.
 - What subjects did you want to pursue?
 - What other colleges did you apply to?

- Why did you attend the school you did?
- Classes
- Professors
- Activities
- Roommates and friends
- College housing
- Clubs, fraternities, sports
- Major?
- Tell us about the jobs you have had since graduation.
 - What kind of work did you want to?
 - What kind of work did you end up pursuing?
 - Any challenges in obtaining employment?
 - Roles, responsibilities, accomplishments.
 - How has your work changed over time?
- Talk about what you like to do in your leisure time.
- Tell us more about your spouse, marriage and family life.
 - How did you meet your spouse?
 - Tell us about your spouse - his/her background, family life, education, occupation, etc.
 - Describe your spouse.
 - Tell us how your relationship unfolded.
 - When were you married?
 - Tell us about the wedding day.
 - Did you go on a honeymoon?
 - Tell us about your first home.
 - Why did you want to be married?
 - When did you start your family?
 - What was it like becoming a parent?
 - Children's names and birthdates.
 - Memories from raising your child.
 - How have your children's lives unfolded?
 - Family vacations?
 - Traditions?
 - Hopes dreams for your children.
 - Relationship with your spouse.
 - Do you have grandchildren?
- Looking back, what stands out to you?
- How have you seen the world changed?
- Is there anything you would have done differently?
- What are some of your favorite memories?
- What were some low points? How did you get through?
- What would you want future generations to know about you and your life?
- Is there anything I am missing or forgot to ask about?

Appendix: Oral History Resources

The following resources should serve as guides for oral history research, methodology, archives management and project planning. Have a great resource to add? Please share with voices@noaa.gov.

Websites

- American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress - <http://www.loc.gov/folklife>
- Baylor Institute for Oral History - <https://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory>
- Indiana University Center for the Study of History and Memory - <http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/>
- Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History - <https://libraries.uky.edu/nunncenter>
- Maine Folklife Center - <https://umaine.edu/folklife>
- Moyer, Judith. Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History. Available at http://www.dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html. Includes extensive bibliography.
- Oral History Association (OHA) - <http://www.oralhistory.org/>
- Oral History in the Digital Age - <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu>
- Oral History Society (OHS) - <http://www.ohs.org.uh/>
- Southern Oral History Program. *How to: Resources for Planning and Conducting Oral History Interviews*. Available at: <http://www.sohp.org/howto/index.html>
- Transom - www.transom.org

Books

Charlton, Thomas L., Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds. *Handbook of Oral History*. Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2006.

Frisch, Michael. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991.

Mackay, Nancy. *Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: Left Coast Press, 2007.

Neuenschwander, John H. *Oral History and the Law*, 3rd ed. Carlisle, PA: Oral History Association, 2002.

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Ritchie, Donald A., ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Sommer, Barbara W. and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2002.

Thompson, Paul. *The Voices of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

About the Author

Molly Graham is a professional oral historian and documentarian. She trained at the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies in Portland, Maine where she produced the award-winning radio documentary, *Besides Life Here*, which has been licensed by several National Public Radio affiliates. She has her master's degree in Library Science and Archives Management from Simmons College in Boston.

Molly is the former director of the oral history program at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum and Assistant Director of the Rutgers Oral History Archives. In 2013, she cofounded Oral History & Folklife Research, Inc., with the mission of preserving the stories, voices, and cultural traditions of Maine and beyond.

She is the project manager for the Voices Oral History Collection, where she collects, preserves and curates oral histories documenting historical environmental change and its impacts on fisheries, oceans and coasts.

Please reach out to Molly with introductions, questions and, of course, stories.

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