

SOME THOUGHTS ON ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is defined by the Oral History Association as “a method of gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life.” This broad definition can and does cover interviews done by everyone from journalists to anthropologists. Several important ingredients are necessary to obtain an interview that will be useful to future generations. It is important to honor a narrator’s willingness to share his or her life by getting as many detailed memories as possible.

1. **Research** prior to the interview allows you to be familiar with the background of the person you are interviewing. Equally important, it gives you knowledge of the time period or subject so that you will be able to ask intelligent questions, understand the (hopefully) detailed explanations, and help the narrator to dig deeper into his/her memory and elicit elusive details.

2. A **directional microphone**, instead of the internal mike included with most recorders, is very helpful in getting a clear recording. Placed between you and slightly pointed towards the narrator, it should pick up both voices. Investing in good equipment is always a good idea. If you save digital files, save .wav files (not .mp3) on MAM-A brand gold CD-Rs (not read-write CDs). If you use cassette tapes, make sure they’re 60-minute. Also, we recommend interviewing one person at a time, in a quiet place.

3. **Sensitive listening** is probably the most important quality for an interviewer. It is not enough to listen—the narrator must know that you are listening. A few perceptive questions, eye contact, shared laughter, smiling and nodding; all these responses let the narrator see how interesting his/her experiences are to you. The best way to be a good listener is to care about what the narrator is saying to you. If you notice your mind wandering while listening, then be assured the narrator will also notice and will curb his/her stories. If, when you leave the interview, you feel a warm atmosphere, you are treated like an old friend, and you experience a mental fatigue from listening so hard, then you have been a good listener. A good listener helps make a quality interview.

4. A **legal release** allows the interview to be used later by you or other researchers. Without such a release, you may be liable should family members ever have objections to the contents of the recording. Also without a release, you are not the recording’s legal owner, and the public can never use it. Since the use of the special information contained in oral history interviews is most important, the necessity for getting a legal release cannot be stressed too much. We have found that few people refuse to sign the release. Copies of the release form used by the Idaho Oral History Center can be found in *A Field Notebook for Oral History* or on our web site.

5. Making a simple **index by minute** of the recording is very helpful because it allows you to go right to the place you want when you later try to find one particular story. Also, it is a good idea to label the discs or tapes as soon as they are created: person interviewed, interviewer, date, and place interviewed.

6. If you make recordings for family history or personal interest, think about **donating** them to our collection or to a local library, historical society or oral history project. Different collections may have differing criteria for acceptance (a legal release is usually necessary), so you might want to check with the repository before you begin your project.

The Idaho Oral History Center is always willing to answer questions or provide any help possible to those interested in starting an oral history project. Contact us at:

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http://history.idaho.gov/oralhistory_contactiohc.html