



TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY • ESD 113

INTRODUCTION TO THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Although William Ferris was deeply intimate with his own home town, he discovered it anew when he returned to the South knowing how to document and understand its cultural complexities. He writes, “I left the South on a journey and, like a wanderer in Greek mythology, my travels brought me back to the place where I began.” This ancient theme is accessible to us through one of the signal methods of ethnography: oral history.

Take this cue from Ferris and do the same: return to one of your own important places by developing an Oral History Project. You will learn about one person’s experience, and create a project that conveys what you find. The key is listening, hearing what your narrator has to say, and engaging in dialogue. In doing so, you will explore—and illuminate for the rest of us—central questions about the relationship between “our places” and the larger narratives of American history.

You will work on this project throughout the year. By our May meeting, you will have interviewed your narrator and transcribed the dialogue. During our first Summer Institute in June, you will learn how to use the transcription to develop your project. And at our second Summer Institute in July, you each will present your project. Throughout this work, we will discuss how to use the skills you are learning to develop oral history projects that will help your students to discover *their* places anew.

Choosing Your Narrator

Your narrator should be an elder. Likely you’ll have a number of people to consider interviewing. You might choose a relative: a grandparent, parent, great aunt, uncle, cousin, and so on. How to decide whom to ask? Choose someone whose history intrigues you in relation to issues of place that our TAH Project is addressing. It’s worth taking time to mull over your family constellation. You might get other family members’ advice. You might also choose an elder from your local community. Consider a leader in the nearest tribal community, or someone who has lived in your town for most or all of his life. Also consider proximity: there’s a real benefit if you can conduct your interviews face-to-face rather than over the phone.

Your decision will depend on the person’s willingness and availability. In asking him or her to participate, you explain what the project is about: you want to take down some of her stories about her experiences, to get a sense of how she sees the shape of her life, to hear how she relates to the theme of place and its relationship to larger themes in American history. Be sure that your narrator can do a pre-interview and two interviews between now and our next meeting in May. After the agreement is set, write a 1-2 page statement describing your narrator and what interests you about him or her. Send it to Anna by the end of April, and she will arrange to have it available to everyone else in our TAH Project.

Pre-interview

This session can be done by phone or in person. With your narrator's help, map the terrain to be covered in the interviews. You will get better acquainted with her stories, biography, and points of view, and show her what you're interested in. Figure it will take a half hour to an hour. *Take good notes.*

A good way to approach this session as an overview of your narrator's life history. You may want to go through the contours of her biography together, starting from childhood. Note carefully the periods, topics, events, relationships, and the like where she puts her expressive energies. Maybe she will have much to say about her father and little about her mother, or much to say about her experiences in high school, and little about her marriage. There will be certain matters that hold special meaning for her, certain values she finds compelling. Be attentive to moments when place mattered to her: when she moved and why, or when something fundamental changed about her town. Be ready to explore these in depth in the recorded interviews. Consider crucial decisions, events, and turning points. What's little discussed may also be significant, but perhaps more fraught—and so broach these, if you choose to, with care. Stress that the interviews will focus on the things *she* wants to tell about.

If you know your narrator well, suggest what some of these stories and topics might be. If not, get leads from relatives or other townspeople who do. Suggest apt subjects from our inquiry into place: what places were important her, and when, and why. Consider various kinds of influences (religion, ethnicity, gender, close relationships, etc.) and experiences (an obstacle, a success, an effort, etc.), and how they help tell the story of her place(s). Think ahead to what it will be like later on in the project to place your narrator's personal experience in larger social and historical contexts. Your narrator might have much to say about how she sees herself in terms of family, community, society, or history. For an inspirational sampling of oral testimonies, listen to some of the weekly radio broadcasts of stories from the national StoryCorps project, at www.npr.org.

A danger with this session is that it can start to turn into the interview, with the narrator saying great stuff and you not recording it. Then when you do the actual interview, you'll ask for things already told, which won't seem fresh the second time around. Make sure this is a *planning* session! Skim the surface; take soundings; touch on a range of topics. If your narrator tells more than a few stories, say: "We've got to save this for next time." Or make the session short.

Get biographical data: date and place of birth, parents' backgrounds, education, places lived, job history, other significant activities. Draw up a genealogical chart, if you like. Ask whether there are any documents, books, photos, treasured material objects, etc. that would be good for you to see.

By the time you're done you should have agreed on a number of the main topics that will be covered in the interviews. Be sure to set the time for your next meeting. Afterwards, write an account of your experience of the pre-interview. What was the dynamic of the interaction like? How did it feel to engage your relative in this way? Were surprising sentiments revealed? Within a few days, review your notes to make an initial list of questions and topics for the interview. Then, if needed, do some reading to familiarize yourself with topics or events you need to know more about. Take references to the past that you don't understand as points to be explored, and find out what you can. Use the *Historical Atlas of the United States* and *Who Built America?* to help you.

(In May, you'll receive the second volume of *Who Built America?*, which brings social history into the late 20th century and will likely be of great help to you in building context for your narrator's stories.)

Equipment for the Interviews

The Teaching American History Project has purchased for each of you an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder. The recorder is simple to use; it has an integrated microphone and speakers. This is ideal for in-person interviews. If you will do your interviews by telephone, there is an accessory available that makes this easier (see the back of the instruction manual). Strive for good sound quality. (You should preserve a copy of the interviews on a CD or tape for your narrator and for yourself.) It's absolutely crucial to practice operating your machine, and make sure it's working correctly. There's no more sinking feeling than finding, after the interview, that nothing was recorded.

The Two Interviews

Find a quiet space for the interview. If possible, disconnect the phone (and turn off our cell phone) so you won't be interrupted. Take the time you need to position your equipment. Place the recorder so you can monitor it occasionally, but near the narrator. Do a quick test and playback while chatting, so you'll know everything's working. Once you're interviewing, you'll want to keep rough track of the time.

You'll have prepared about a page's worth of questions and topics that you know or imagine may be raised in the interview. Develop the questions based on your pre-interview, and on your sense of how the theme of place bears on this particular person's experience. This isn't a checklist. Don't follow it slavishly. As the interview progresses you may not refer to it much, but it's vital as an aid for remembering and for guiding the conversation.

When you've turned the recorder on to begin the interview, it's good to mark the shift. Say something to the effect of, "Okay, let's start. . . The first thing I wanted to ask you about is - - ." Begin with a topic that will be easy to warm up to, like, "How did you or your parents decide to move to Washington?" (calling for a story you know the narrator will have). Fears about "mike fright" are greatly exaggerated: most of the time *the interviewer* is the nervous one. Once the interview gets rolling you'll both relax into it. Starting with confident, inviting questions sets the right tone for the whole interchange.

Open-ended interviewing is both *thematic* and *chronological*. For instance, you can start the interview at the beginning, with your narrator's childhood, and move forward in time, or you can start in adulthood and move rather quickly into the tale of the business she founded. There's no right order to an interview, but there is logic to storytelling. For one thing, it has beginnings, middles and ends. Since memory works associatively, it's good to stay with a topic for a while (whether it's childhood, family, or livelihood), following your narrator's train of thought wherever it leads. You want her to express herself fully. In your role guiding the interview, you may need to decide when a productive subject starts to lag and it's time to move on. (You can come back to it in the second interview.) You'll likely find that the conversation seems naturally to order itself around a combination of time periods and themes. And there may be critical moments—the time

the business almost went under, the workers went on strike, a child's life was saved—that will be dramatic narratives, especially important to record.

You make it easier for your narrator to give her point of view in depth if you convey, by words and expression of interest, that her accounts of lived experience are what you want to hear. Some persons are more prone to “tell stories” while others tend to “describe what it was (or is) like.” Don't worry if your narrator is more of a describer than a storyteller, but encourage her to expand on specifics when you can. A good technique for encouraging someone to shift from a general description (“They used to do such-and-such”) to a more personal account is the “probe.” Edward Ives gives examples of probing in his guide, *The Tape Recorded Interview*. If the narrator has given a general description, Ives suggests, you can follow up with something like:

“Did that ever happen to you?”

“Did you ever do that yourself?”

“Can you give me an example of that?”

“Where was this? When?”

“Wait a minute. I don't quite see how that worked. Now you say that. . .”

The success of this kind of interviewing depends on your capacity to listen to what's being said, and to guide the narrator through gentle suggestion. One good technique to keep things centered on the narrator's understanding is to return to some important or unclear point after the telling is finished. This invites the narrator to reenter the experience, to expand on it, maybe to tell the next episode of an ongoing saga. Being attentive to the narrator signals to her that you want to hear more. Silence can also be quite effective: a comfortable pause during which the narrator reflects on what to speak about next.

The art of interviewing involves recognizing how the narrator's interests touch on your own, and how to ask questions that highlight your interests while engaging your narrator's. Pursuing some of your own questions needn't slant discussion away from your narrator. It strengthens the interview as a dialogue—one that crosses generations. Before the interview winds down, check your list of questions/topics to see what you have and haven't covered. The typical length for an interview is between one and two hours.

Before leaving, arrange the time for your next interview. It's good to space them about a week—not more than two weeks—apart. Write an account about your experience after each interview, as you did after the pre-interview.

Once you've transcribed the first interview, take stock of where you are in documenting your narrator's life history. You may feel that two interviews aren't nearly enough, that there are hard choices about which subjects to pursue and which to leave out. In the space for reflection for both of you between the interviews, you'll decide how to proceed. You'll digest what's been said and develop a second set of questions that will you and the narrator get more pointedly at key issues and themes in your narrator's life history. Again, prepare a sheet of potential questions and topics in advance. Consider matters that haven't been covered, or covered enough, yet. Consider mysteries that still need illuminating.

Transcribing

Transcription is an accurate written record of oral testimony. With digital files, the quickest, easiest way to do this is by using a transcription program: Express Scribe, which you can

download for free at www.download.com. You can plug the digital recorder into your computer's USB port and the program will play your interview back to you. The speed is adjustable, so you can easily type as you listen.

You should transcribe the interviews (almost) in full. It's much easier to study your narrator's testimony in written form. Until you outline and compose your presentation, you won't know which excerpts to quote verbatim, which to paraphrase, and which to use as evidence in more limited ways. These decisions will be better informed if you have the entire text of the interviews in front of you.

Transcriptions should be word-for-word, leaving out only "ums" and other non-words. However, there will likely be moments, maybe even sections, of the interview, that seem marginal to or entirely off the subject. If these are short, you can indicate omission by ellipses (...); if longer, you can use brackets with a brief note about the topic(s) deleted. Use your judgment about what to leave out—but if you find yourself dithering, it may take more time to leave it out than to include it. After you've completed your rough draft of the transcript, listen to the testimony again with the typed draft in front of you. Add what you missed and correct what you got wrong.

Here are some guidelines for improving readability:

1. Eliminate extraneous material. Sometimes, for example, a speaker will start in one direction and then take off in another. The "false" start should be stricken, unless you deem it to be significant (as when a speaker chooses not to address a controversial subject).
2. Combine pieces of testimony. Similarly, oral testimony on the same topic from different parts of the interviews can be knit together within the paper.
3. Reduce repetition. Speech tends towards redundancy. When the narrator says essentially the same thing (often using many of the same words) in different sentences, you can cut the extra ones, but not if you think they contribute to the effect, say, by drawing emphasis to a point. The same can be true for certain words that are injected repeatedly into statements: you can cut some of them out if you think that they detract attention from what is being said.

Paragraphing. There are a number of speech features to weigh in deciding where to begin a new paragraph. The two most essential are these: change of topic or shift within a topic; and longer pauses, relative to the length of pauses between sentences. (Change in intonation is a third feature, and the occurrence of verbal markers such as the word "so" is a fourth: you can listen for these, but they're somewhat trickier to pick up, and they vary from speaker to speaker.)

Bring the transcript to our session on May, and be prepared to share it with the group. Feel free to write to Nancy if you have any questions about this project. Enjoy!