

Oral History for Beginners, Part II of II **Elizabeth Lowman, Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, Seminole Tribe of Florida**

Oral History Programs in Native-Led Programs

There are many reasons your Tribe or institution may choose to start or maintain an oral history program. The most obvious reason is that Native traditions, culture, and history are passed down in the oral tradition. There are major benefits to a tribe that chooses to maintain their own program.

- The Tribe can choose the direction of the program
- Content
 - Demonstration
 - Songs/ Medicine
 - Legends/stories
 - History
 - Biographical
 - Language
- Storage
 - Facilities with Medicine
 - Traditional Properties
 - Tribal Institutions
- Accessibility
 - Researchers?
 - Tribal Members Only?
 - Potential Complications
 - Grant Money
 - “Grated Access”
 - Internet
- Publication

Collections Development

Developing the content of the collection is incredibly important. The projects identified by the program will make up the content of the collection. (Projects were covered in the first half of this workshop.) It is important for your institution to identify areas of concern. Identifying those areas can be done in several ways.

Focus Groups/Community Meetings: Small groups of Tribal Members are the best indicators for how to develop the collection. Ask important questions like:

- What do you think we should ask people in interviews?
- What should we NOT ask people in interviews?

- What information would you like to see added to the archives through oral history interviews?
- Do you think the interviews should be conducted in the language if possible?
- Who should have access to the interviews?
- What cultural demonstrations should be recorded?
- How should the interviews be made accessible?
- How should the interviews be treated culturally?
- Who should do the interviews?
- Should people be paid for participating in the interviews?
- Should interviewers be paid?

Elders: The elders and seniors of the community often have a different opinion of what should be saved and why. The seniors and elders have a very valuable insight to what they have seen disappear over the years. Their input should be highly valued.

Ask the seniors and elders questions like:

- Who should we talk to about the old ways?
- What kinds of questions should we ask people?
- What traditions do you think are ending? Should we record them?
- Are there any differences in traditions that we should document?

Institution: The institution you work for, whether it is a museum or the Tribe itself, will have expectations of the program's content. It is important to identify the institution's expectations and work them into your program lists. Sometimes projects are temporarily exhibit-driven, but the addition to the collection can be a longer life story interview that contributes beyond the temporary need of the institution.

Project Lists: Some Oral History Programs can attack their projects one at a time. Personally, I have several project lists in queue. I just try and get people as they become available. Because of this multiple projects can be occurring at the same time. When an exhibit is coming I move those interviews to the top of the priority list and try to work on those first; however, I do not stop working on the other projects.

Using Equipment

Your choice of equipment is very important. Ideally the stories you collect will remain in archives indefinitely. With the digital technology of today, an interview sounds exactly as it did when it was conducted.

OHA- Digital Audio and Portable Recorders: The Basics-
http://www.oralhistory.org/technology/audio_basics/.

OHA- Digital Audio Glossary: [Digital Audio Glossary.pdf](#)

Using a Marantz or recorder with a microphone:

- Setting up
 - Microphone selection
 - Testing equipment
 - Playback
 - Location selection
 - Paperwork
- Flash Card recording
 - Reformatting cards
 - When to change cards
 - Pulling data off the flash cards

Using a handheld device with no microphone:

- Setting up
 - Device placement
 - Testing equipment
 - Playback
 - Location selection
- Retrieving Data
 - Software
 - Splitting channels

Using a Video Camera

- Setting Up
 - Device Placement
 - Testing Equipment
 - Playback
 - Location Selection
- Digitization/ Retrieving Data

Phone Interview Technology

- Choice of Recording Medium
 - Direct recorder
 - Device Placement
 - Testing Equipment
 - Procedures and Techniques

The Interview

It is no secret that interviews can be tricky. Sometimes just getting the interview scheduled is the hardest part. In many cases it is easier to have an interview list and have

the questions for those people typed up and ready to go at any second. More often than not, people will decide they are available on a moment's notice.

Many Oral Historians will encourage you to get the interview in a secluded room, preferably set up for recording. In this situation, I tend to disagree. Interviewing people outside can be a wonderful experience for the narrator. People's houses also make great interview spots. You want to make sure people are comfortable wherever you choose to do the interview. If a person is uncomfortable, they will clam up and not talk.

Make sure to provide your narrator with water. Ask them if they need anything else to help them feel more comfortable.

Start off asking people their names, clan, birthday, where they were born, and who their parents are. This prevents confusion over identity when people have repeating names.

Remember it is an interview, not an interrogation. I make sure to tell people beforehand that they do not have to answer any questions that they do not want to. I tell them I can stop the interview for any reason. Remember, an interview is a gift deeded to your institution. Treat your narrator like a person giving you a huge monetary donation. *Their contribution to the collection is invaluable.*

Editing Audio with Audacity

<http://www.guidesandtutorials.com/audacity-tutorial.html>.

Collections Management

Keeping your collection organized is very important. If a researcher cannot locate the media and paperwork, the collection is useless. Your institution will need to come up with its own system for organization. As an example, I will share my collection organization and policies in the next section.

AAM- Writing a Collections Management Policy: [cmp development.pdf](#)

Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Collections Management Policy: [Collection Mgmt Policy.doc](#)

AAM- Museum Code of Ethics: [code of ethics.pdf](#)

AAM- Standards and Best Practices: [standards and best practices.pdf](#)

NPS- Laws, Executive Orders & Regulations: <http://www.nps.gov/history/laws.htm>.

Oral History Association Guidelines:

http://www.oralhistory.org/wiki/index.php/Evaluation_Guide.

Caring for your Media

Light, Climate, and Humidity Control- The Canadian Conservation Institute recommends that your media be store at less than 50% relative humidity (RH). Optical media is stored at 50-75 degrees Fahrenheit. Magnetic tapes should be stored at 15-50% RH and at 46-74 degrees Fahrenheit. **Try to avoid fluctuations in humidity because it can ruin all types of media.**

Boxes- Boxes should be sturdy, made for what you are using them for, and be acid-free. Many places sell these items (such as Gaylord, Light Impressions, University Products, and so on).

Magnetic Tape- Digital magnetic tapes have a life expectancy of about 5-10 years, while analog tapes last for approximately 10-30 years. Magnetic tapes can suffer from many types of deterioration, so it is important to store magnetic tapes in the proper conditions. First of all, store the tapes away from magnetic fields, at least 3 inches away. Tapes should be stored vertically on their edges. Magnetic tapes should be stored in polyethylene/polypropylene/polystyrene cases.

CD/DVDs- Optical media has a life expectancy of 5-50 years depending on the media. CDs and DVDs should be stored in polyethylene/polypropylene/polystyrene cases. Plastic sleeves will not protect your media and they can even physically damage the surface of CDs and DVDs. They should be stored vertically on their edges and away from light, preferably in boxes.

- CDs and DVDs should never have labels or stickers placed on the top of the disk. The adhesive, even when acid-free, can damage the digital files on the disk. Disks should be labeled on the plastic ring in the middle.

Paper- Paper items should be organized in separate document boxes. Document folders can contain transcripts, field notes, biographical information, and any other papers that result from the interview. Some paper items, such as the deed of gift, are stored in the accession files.

Digital Files- Digital files are always at risk for corruption, loss, and becoming obsolete. The way to address the first two problems, corruption and loss, is to make two copies of the digital file onto a disk. This will not ensure its preservation, but it will help. Also make sure the files are backed up on a server. External hard drives are good as well, but not as secure as a server. Unfortunately, there is no way to prevent media from becoming obsolete. However, you can take steps to make sure your media is up to date and there are plans for conversions. Keep up to date with the latest digital mediums. Then you will want to consult with the standards in the field and decide if your institution would prefer to do conversions in house or send them out to an external company.

Media type	Predicted longevity
Magnetic disks	
Hard disks	2–5 years
Floppy diskettes	5–15 years
Magnetic tapes	
Digital	5–10 years
Analog	10–30 years
Optical discs	
CD-RW, DVD-RW, DVD+RW	5–10 years
CD-R (cyanine and azo dyes)	5–10 years
Audio CD, DVD movie	10–50 years
CD-R (phthalocyanine dye, silver metal layer)	10–50 years
DVD-R, DVD+R	10–50 years
CD-R (phthalocyanine dye, gold metal layer)	>100 years
Other optical discs	
MO, WORM, etc.	10–25 years?
Flash media	?

*Chart from Canadian Conservation Institute

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