Oral History for Beginners, Part I of II
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What is Oral History?

Oral history predates any other form of history. Ancient civilizations passed oral tradition down from one generation to the next for thousands of years before the oral history was written down. Historic accounts and legends such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (written between 2750 and 2500 BC) and the *Odyssey* (630 BC) are examples of oral history that survived hundreds or thousands of years before being written down. Around 1000 BC, Greek philosophers started using the scientific method to explain the various parts of the universe, which included social and historic inquiry.

In 440 BC, a man by the name of Herodotus wrote *The Histories*. Herodotus is often called the "father of modern history," but especially the "father of oral history." Herodotus traveled to many foreign lands and conducted interviews with people and studied communities. He reported his findings and his narrative description of wars and battles in the *Histories*. Many critics of his time, and later times, thought Herodotus's "stories" were untrue or inflated and dubbed him the "father of lies." In more recent times, DNA and archaeology have validated Herodotus's claims of various animals, movement of people, and ancient battlegrounds.[1]

Less than ten years later, Thucydides followed Herodotus's methods, improved on them, and wrote the *History of the Peloponnesian War* in 431 BC. Thus, the discipline of history and oral history was born. In recent times, oral history is a rapid growing study

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[1] Nicholas Wade, "DNA Boosts Herodotus' Account of Etruscans as Migrants to Italy," 3 April 2007, *New York Times*. See also, Eileen Murphy, "Herodotus and the Amazons Meet the Cyclops: Philology, Osteoarchaeology and the Eurasian Iron Age." Reprinted in Eberhard W. Sauer, Editor. <u>Archaeology and Ancient History: Breaking Down the Boundaries</u>. Routledge: New York, 2004.

with ethical guidelines, principles, and standards set forth by the Oral History Association (OHA). Additionally, oral history methodology is academically studied and advanced degrees are offered in oral history. The OHA states that oral history is "a method of gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life."[2] Many libraries at the university, public, and institutional levels have a special collection in their library comprised of oral histories.

Native Americans and Oral History

Oral History is a practice used by historians, academics of all fields, and museum professionals worldwide. Some oral historians strictly interpret the oral history practice as interviews collected through well-researched question and answer interviews, transcribed, and made available to researchers. In *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, Donald Ritchie stated, "Oral history is too dynamic and creative a field to be entirely captured by any single definition. For every rule, an exception has worked."[3] Native American oral histories are one of the exceptions Ritchie alludes to.

Native American oral history should be treated *the same and different* as other oral histories. The interviews should be treated the same in that every interview subject should be treated like their life, their story, and their contribution to history is important- not just the stories of their ancestors. The story of each Tribal Member makes an important contribution to the Tribe and the documentation of the Tribe's history.

Native American oral histories should be treated different for many reasons, some of which we will cover here. First of all, most Native American history is rooted in Oral

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[2] Oral History Association, "Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association." Pamphlet 3, September 2000.
[3] Ritchie, Donald A., *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17.

Tradition. Most people involved in this conference will understand what that means. For the purposes of conducting oral histories, a person conducting oral histories should be able to identify the points in the oral tradition that make the oral histories unique. When speaking about the history of the Tribe, many tribal members speak in the first person even when they are discussing an even that happened hundreds of years before they were born. This is a reflection of history being passed down through the oral tradition.

The oral tradition crosses over into so many aspects of native life, that many topics in the oral history collection will not be "traditional" topics. The person conducting the interviews will have to make judgment calls about what topics should be covered by their collection. For example, Native collections may contain demonstration videos of people cooking, audio recordings of legends, videos of people building things, people making traditional arts, songs, or just language. Each Tribe has various rules and sometimes laws regarding what can and cannot be recorded. It is very important to follow those rules or laws at all times. Even though many important ceremonial events can be captured by audio or video, it may be advisable to avoid those topics unless the Tribe has specifically asked for it.

It is also important to remember that many clans and families will have different interpretations of the same event. That does not mean someone is right and someone is wrong. The interviewer is there to document and capture the story of the narrator, not pass judgment on what is true and what is not.

The last difference worth mention is accessibility to the collection. Each museum, library, oral history program, and Tribe will have to decide what is best for them. For example, the Seminole Tribe of Florida's Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum's Oral

History Collection is closed to outside researchers. The Collection is, however, open to all Seminole Tribal Members. Deciding who the collection will be open to can determine what kinds of funding the oral history project or program can accept. Many Federal grants require that the collection, or a percentage of it, must be open to the public and researchers.

Standard Practices for Oral History

- **Oral History Association (OHA)-** The Oral History Association is *the authority* on Oral History practice standards.

- **Helpful OHA Links:**

    - **Evaluation Guide (The Guide to Best Practices):**

      http://www.oralhistory.org/network/mw/index.php/Evaluation_Guide

- **Food for thought:** The OHA conference does not have a large representation of Native American oral historians. If you have the time and funding (or you can apply for a scholarship) try and attend the conference. It is good for academics who may do interviews with Native American tribes in the future to hear about Native American oral histories from Native Americans.

Oral History Jargon

- **Narrator/Interviewee-** This is the person being interviewed.

- **Interviewer-** Person conducting the interview

- **Oral History Project-** A project is set up with plans, goals, and a list of narrators or potential narrators. Typically projects have specific parameters and a purpose.

- **Oral History Program-** A program is an ongoing effort, usually with a director, to put together projects, organize and manage collections, and collect interviews.

- **Accession Number**- The accession number is a unique number assigned to each interview and the corresponding material.

- **Catalog Number**- The catalog number is followed by the accession number. Each item in the accession receives a catalog number.

- **Accession Records-** This is the file that contains the deed of gift and other pertinent information to the catalog record.

- **Digitization-** The process of converting older media, especially magnetic tape, to a digital format.

- **File Formats-** This refers to the end product of digital formats. Some formats such as .WAV and .AVI are uncompressed, large, and the most desirable formats. Compressed formats such as .MP3 and .MPEG are not archival quality, but may be acceptable for interviews placed on the internet.

Project development

Oral history projects are what make up an oral history collection in a larger institution. In a smaller institution, they may be the result of an impending exhibit, a publication, or just a topic of inquiry. Projects do not need strict parameters or guidelines.

Example of an Oral History Project Description:

The Seminole Tribe wished to honor their veterans by documenting their memories of life and service to the United States. The Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, therefore, has launched a Veterans Oral History Project.

Our primary focus is:

- *World War II (1939-1946)*
- *Korean War (1950-1955)*
- *Vietnam War (1961-1975)*
- *Persian Gulf War (1990-1995)*
- *Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts (2001-present)*

The interviews will be kept in the Oral History Collection at the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum and will only be accessible to Seminole Tribal Members. If the narrator wishes, their material will be considered for use in future exhibits in the museum and the Veteran's Memorial Building on the Brighton Reservation.

The interviews will be a mixture of audio and video mediums, depending upon the situation surrounding the interview. The program will also interview family members of deceased and living veterans. The interviews with family members will focus on how the veteran's service impacted their life.

What comes next?

After making a project description, you must identify who you are going to interview.

A schedule is preferable, but sometimes it is hard to get people to stick to a schedule.

It is best to identify who should be interviewed and why.

The next step is to spend time researching the person's background and collecting

background information on the topic you are interviewing the person about. A

common rule of thumb is to spend 3-4 hours researching for an interview. That is not

necessary if your collective knowledge of the subject is vast.

It is a good idea to write the questions for each person on your interview list. The

questions are more like a guideline to help keep the interviewer on track and to make

sure no important questions are overlooked. There is no need to strictly keep to the

interview questions.

Starting off and finishing: Paperwork

Using the correct paperwork is an important part of conducting oral histories and ensuring legal ownership of the material for use by you museum, archive, and/or Tribe.

Before the interview:

- **Deed of Gift/Program Agreement Form/Informed Consent-** This is THE most important piece of paperwork. If your narrator will only sign one thing, make sure it is the deed of gift. This will give permission for the museum to have and use the interview and photographs from the interview. Furthermore, this is where the narrator can decide how they want their interview restricted, or not restricted.

- **Biographical Data Sheet**- This form can be modified to suit the program's needs. The information from this paper will fill the data fields in the "people Biographies" section of pastperfect. If the program does not have pastperfect, it will still provide the museum with pertinent information pertaining to the narrator.

- **Family Trees-** If genealogy is important, a form family tree is a good addition to the battery of paperwork. Many people choose to take it with them and send it back at a later date.

After the interview:

- **Photograph-** It is important to try and get a photograph of the person that has been interviewed. The digital photograph can be attached to the pastperfect catalog record and to the people biographies section.

- **Thank you letter-** This is an old courtesy most people greatly appreciate.

- **Copy of the interview-** A digital or CD/DVD recording should be sent to the narrator with the thank-you letter.

- **Gift-** Many programs find small gifts to give to the narrators. The gift can be given at the conclusion of the interview or mailed to the person later.

- **Transcripts-** Many academic institutions will transcribe their interviews and mail them to the narrator for review. The narrator then has the option to edit parts of the transcript they would like changed. The handling of transcripts and editing will be a decision made by the institution entrusted with the oral histories.

The Interview

Interviewing can be a little unnerving at first. It is very important to be organized or an interview can go sour…quickly. Make sure you have your paperwork in order, your equipment is in good, working order, you have all of your equipment, and that you have time to set-up. It is okay to set-up with your narrator waiting. Give your narrator all of their paperwork to fill out while you set-up and explain that you are setting up.

Bring props. Photographs and objects tend to rekindle memories. It may also help your library, museum, or archive to identify people in photographs and gain valuable information about places and people in photographs. Also, ask to see the stuff the narrator may have. Your museum, library, or archive may be interested in some of the stuff they have and more information can be gained.

Try to be at ease. If you are comfortable, your narrator will be comfortable too. Also, bring water for yourself and the narrator. Explain to the narrator what kind of questions you will be asking. Tell them it is okay for them to not answer questions if they want. Also, tell them you can stop the interview for restroom breaks and any

other interruptions that may arise. I often show the narrator where the pause button is located on the recorder so they can press it themselves. In the beginning of the interview, you should have a script to follow.

Example:

"This is Elizabeth Lowman interviewing Joe Smith. Today is October 19, 2009. We are at the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum located on the Big Cypress Reservation. This interview is being recorded. Joe, do you understand this interview is being recorded?"

Wait for your narrator to respond.

(Explain how the interview will go, this is not a Hollywood production.) "All right, we are going to start off with some basic information for the record.

What is your name?

Who are your parents?

What is your clan?

Where were you born?

What is your birthday?"

Biographical information is important for several reasons. First of all, people will inevitably have same names. Also, there will be Juniors and Seniors. The biographical information asked in the beginning solidifies the identity of the narrator for anyone using the information in the future.

Non-Traditional Interviews and What to Collect

- **Group Interviews-** Many oral history practitioners warn against the use of group interviews for various reasons. In cultures where families resided together and camps were shared by clans or extended family, group interviews may be the most comfortable for everyone. Many families and people who work in the same field have participated in group interviews. Small groups tend to interact with one another, share common memories, and share more.

- **Life story and Subject-based interviews-** Life stories are very important. Each person has an individual history to share. More often than not, they also hold the history of their families, clans, and respective Tribes. It is important to document the world through the eyes of the person you are interviewing. Subject interviews document specific information from people.

- **Demonstration Videos-** Demonstration videos are very important for preserving the precious traditional arts, culture, and other aspects of everyday life. Demonstration videos are often created like a cooking show. There is step-by-step demonstration of how to make something, like a basket, a piece of art, clothing, food, anything that requires a visual accompaniment to the spoken word. As an example, we recorded a demonstration video with one of the few remaining split-palmetto basket makers. Once the basket was complete the video and the basket were put into the museum's collection so the basket would be available for Tribal Members to review, handle, and use as a template. Only record what people are comfortable sharing and make sure they sign the same paperwork.

- **Language-** Recording interviews in the native language is very important. This offers a small insight into the conversational aspects of the language and preserves language as a tradition, not just words.

- **Oral Traditions-** The oral tradition is harder to document than straight history. Each Tribe has to decide what they are willing to collect/share. For us, collecting the legends from the elders and the younger people entrusted with the legends was a priority. We held a series of events called "Seminole Storytellers" that was open to Tribal Members only. We recorded the legends as the elders told them to small groups of seniors and Seminole Tribal members. Not only were we able to capture the dynamic of the storyteller with the audience, we were able to discuss who learned the legends and why they were chosen, rules, when legends were told, and what they mean. The events attracted everyone from children to seniors. There are many ways to capture this unique part of Native culture, but what you decide to collect and how will have to be tailored for the tribe providing the history. Oral tradition is oral history!

- **The Unknown-** New topics will arise. Do not be afraid to try and document new or unexplored topics.

Using Oral History

- **Museums-** Exhibits, publications, interpretive material
  - o Smithsonian Traveling Exhibit: Native Words Native Warriors: http://www.nmai.si.edu/education/codetalkers/.

- o Oklahoma History Center: http://www.oklahomahistorycenter.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=30&Itemid=46.

- o American Indian Cultural Center and Museum (currently under construction): http://www.aiccm.com/cultural-center-museum.

- **Archives-** Primary sources, interpretive

- **Libraries**- Research collection, publications

Oral History Collections: Basic Care and Housing

- **Older Media-** Some institutions have older media such as VHS, BETA, Cassette tapes, micro-cassettes, etc. This older media needs to be digitized and house properly.

- **Newer Recordings-** Newer, digital recordings can be kept several ways. One of the safest ways is to burn the interviews to an archival gold cd/dvd and burn it to regular cd/dvd. An additional cd/dvd can contain all of the media, plus photographs and all other records related to the interview.

- **Organization-** Oral history collections have to be organized in a way that fits into the existing organization. If no formal organization exists, then the program/project can jump right into the current standards. If your institution is currently using a number system- stick to it! If not, the numbering system used by most museums and archives is the [year.accession number.catalog number]. Example- 2009.13.1. Sometimes the Registrar will prefer the Oral History

Collection is predicated by letters indicating it is a special collection. Ex. OH2009.13.1.

- **Housing-** Housing is critical to the longevity of your media collections. Many things effect media such as humidity, light, temperature, and so much more. Acid-free and polypropylene or polyethylene cases will be critical for the media in the collections.

- **Digitization-** Older media, and some newer media, will need to be digitized. The equipment needed to digitize older media and newer media is sometimes expensive and complicated. Whenever possible, the best equipment possible should be purchased.

- **Accompanying paperwork-** Some paperwork will be placed in the accession file. Some paperwork will go into a file in the "paper" part of the collection.

- **Where to get materials-** There are several good companies that provide housing solutions for digital media.
  - **Gaylord- www.gaylord.com**
  - **Light Impressions- www.lightimpressionsdirect.com**
  - **University Products- www.universityproducts.com**
  - **Metal Edge- www.metaledgeinc.com**

Equipment

OHA- Digital Audio Recorders: http://www.oralhistory.org/technology/recorders/.

OHA- Digital Audio Glossary: Digital_Audio_Glossary.pdf

Buy the best equipment you can with what you have. A "deal" will be a circumstance where you get what you pay for. A top of the line recorder can cost between 500 and 1000 dollars without necessities like microphones and flash cards. Grant money is available for oral history equipment all of the time.

- **Marantz PMD671 and 660- Price $500-$1000-** This recorder will be the best bang for your buck. The recorder allows you to pick your sampling rates, finalize digital tracks every five minutes, record to a flash card, record on one or two channels, and much, much more. Martel electronics has a "Digital Courtroom Recording Package" for about $1300 that includes flashcards, four boom mics, splitters, microphone cords, mic stands, transcription software, transcription pedals, and a headset.

- **Lower-end handheld recorders- $80-$200-** Many of these recorders utilize internal mics, which is not ideal. But, they will work if the program is either doing a large number of field recordings or if the program is building income to purchase a new recorder.

Software

- **Audacity- http://audacity.sourceforge.net/.** Audacity is a **FREE** audio editing software platform. The program is easy enough for anyone to use and it has all the bells and whistles a program will need for basic audio editing. There are other programs such as Soundbooth that can run about $200-$500.

- **DeBugMode Wax 2.0- http://www.debugmode.com/wax/.** DeBugMode Wax 2.0 is a **FREE** video editing software platform. The software

specializes in generating special effects, but it can do basic video editing. There are

many video editing programs.

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