

SO, YOU WANT TO CONDUCT AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW?

Video One: What is Oral History? Presented by Jean Hardy

This transcription is part one of the four-part video series ***SO YOU WANT TO CONDUCT AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW?*** by Jean Hardy, is provided courtesy of Benzonia Public Library when you check out the Oral History Backpack from the [Library of Things collection](#) at BPL.

Be sure to watch all four videos in the ***SO YOU WANT TO CONDUCT AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW?*** series at www.benzonialibrary.org/remembering-benzie or the [Benzonia Public Library YouTube channel](#).

WHAT IS THIS VIDEO SERIES?

This series was prepared and is presented by Jean Hardy, Assistant Professor at Michigan State University, as part of the Remembering Benzie Project for the Benzonia Public Library.

The goal of this series is to familiarize you with oral histories and prepare you to conduct them yourself.

- There are four videos in this series, including:
 - Video One: What is oral history?
 - Video Two: Components of an oral history interview
 - Video Three: Preparing for an oral history interview
 - Video Four: Conducting an oral history interview

If you are using the Benzonia Public Library's equipment available for checkout, there is a complementary video by photographer and videographer Jeff Smith on our [YouTube channel](#) that also walks you through how to use that equipment to record oral histories.

TAKEN TOGETHER, ALL OF THESE THINGS WILL HELP YOU CONDUCT A SUCCESSFUL ORAL HISTORY!

OTHER RESOURCES

- Oral History Association: www.oralhistory.org
 - Offers lots of resources on conducting oral histories, including best principles and practices, which parts of this series is based on
- The Michigan Oral History Association michiganoha.org
- Check Benzonia Public Library's own Remembering Benzie Page at www.benzonialibrary.org/remembering-benzie and the Remembering Benzie oral history videos at the [Remembering Benzie YouTube Channel](#).

SO, YOU WANT TO CONDUCT AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW?

Video One: What is Oral History? Presented by Jean Hardy

VIDEO ONE: WHAT IS AN ORAL HISTORY?

OBJECTIVES FOR THIS VIDEO

There are two main objectives for you to learn from this video:

- First, you will learn what an oral history is, especially what the goals of oral histories are and how they are made.
- Second, you will learn why oral histories are important tools for understanding and preserving the historical record.

If you feel like you already know what oral histories are, please watch this short 10-minute video anyway. You'll probably learn something you didn't know!

WHAT IS AN ORAL HISTORY?

According to the Oral History Association "Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events". The Oral History Association is a not for profit membership organization for people and institutions such as universities and libraries committed to the value and practice of oral history.

- Oral history is not just about capturing the oral history, but also actively preserving it in an accessible format, and putting it in a place where the history can be interpreted for others to understand.
- Second, oral histories involve the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. This means that oral histories need to be captured using the *voices* of the people who experienced or are passing down the history you're interested in recording. Further, oral histories don't only focus on individuals, but want to center and contextualize people in their communities. It is also... "both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies".
- Based on the oral tradition, which originated as a way to pass down histories among cultures without a written language. In one way or another, all histories were oral histories until the creation of written language, and the majority of histories were still oral histories until the very recent past.
- In our context, oral is a method for preserving certain histories through an interview. Oral history is a term used to mean both the method of recording that particular history, as well as the end result or the recording itself. In other words, oral history is a term used for the process of conducting an oral history, AS WELL AS a term used to identify the product that is created, the recording, the transcript, the end result.

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF AN ORAL HISTORY?

- Oral histories are the result of the conscious intention of two or more people to create a permanent record that contributes to an understanding of the past as lived by the person being interviewed. Two important terms here "conscious intention" and "permanent record"
 - Conscious intention, means that the intent is to create an oral history. Oral histories don't happen accidentally.
 - Permanent record, meaning that the goal is to create a historical record that is as permanent as possible.
- The overarching goal of conducting an oral history is so that history can be preserved and, in most cases, made publicly available. Often its contents can be made available to the public, including researchers, community members, library patrons, etc.

SO, YOU WANT TO CONDUCT AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW?

Video One: What is Oral History? Presented by Jean Hardy

- The audience for an oral history largely depends on the purpose of the oral history.
- For example, you might want to conduct an oral history for your family archive, which might not wind up being publicly available.
- But others may want to conduct oral histories that will be available at places like your local historical society.

ACCESSIBILITY AND COMMUNITY ARE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF ORAL HISTORY!

- Accessibility is an important component of oral history and oral histories have historically been a community-oriented practice. This is in part because of the history of how oral histories were made.

HOW ARE ORAL HISTORIES MADE?

- In the past, oral histories were often passed down generation to generation through storytelling, both in public and private settings. Grandparents told their grandchildren, community leaders told their broader community.
- Now we usually conduct an oral history interview with the goal of producing an oral history, resulting in a recording and transcript.
 - An oral history interview is an interview conducted between two or more people. They often have one person who is asking questions, and one or more people that are answering.
 - We will go into more detail on what is exactly a part of conducting an oral history interview in the next video.
 - Through the process of the oral history interview, the words of the person being interviewed are either written down verbatim, or recorded and often later transcribed.

WHY IS ORAL HISTORY IMPORTANT?

- Oral history is different from written history.
 - Whose stories get told?
 - There are several limitations on written history in that not everyone's histories are considered part of or worthy of being considered part of the historical record.
 - How is the history recorded?
 - Oral histories are recorded through voice rather than presentation/interpretation of primary sources.
 - Mode of communication and audience
 - Speaking your thoughts is fundamentally different than writing them
 - Perceived audience in writing versus speaking is different.
- What is oral history able to do that written history isn't?
 - Originated as a way to document unwritten, often invisible histories.
 - The topics of oral histories are often ignored by traditional history making processes because they are deemed unimportant or counter to what should be recorded
- Oftentimes more accessible. And why may that be? Because it's told in a language that people more easily understand and is located in more accessible institutions.

BEFORE THE NEXT VIDEO...

- Think about the following:
 - Why do you want to conduct oral history interviews?
 - What topics are you interested in?