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Conducting Oral History: Background and Methods¹

Katrine Barber, Professor of History
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Summer 2023

The cool, sunny weather was perfect for a drive along the Washington coast. Eighty-seven-year-old Anna Mae Strong sat in the car's passenger seat and told Jazmine Martinez what she remembered about visiting her family's timber allotments on the Quinault Indian Reservation, where they were headed, when she was a little girl. Earlier that week, Martinez had interviewed Strong for the Chinook Nation Elders Oral History Project, a class project to document the history of the Chinook Nation, because she was one of the tribe's oldest members. Today, they were traveling to meet "Soup" Corwan, a longtime friend of Strong's — an elderly fisher whose trailer home abutted the picturesque Quinault River. When they finally arrived, Corwan invited them into his tidy living room where they settled into couches. The trio chatted a bit and then Martinez pulled out her paperwork — an informed consent form that described the interview process and Corwan's rights and a deed of gift that would permit Martinez to deposit the finished interview in an archive — and asked Corwan if she could start the recorder. He laughed and leaned in to hear Martinez's first question. "Mr. Corwan," she started, "can you tell me how you got your nickname 'Soup'?"

What is oral history?

Definition A: 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. — Oral History Association

Definition B: Oral history interviews seek in-depth accounts of personal experience and reflections, with sufficient time allowed for the narrators to give their story the fullness they desire. The content of oral history interviews is grounded in reflections on the past as opposed to commentary on purely contemporary events. — Katrine Barber

¹ This essay originated as a chapter for a co-authored textbook on public history. When life circumstances intervened, I started using the essay in my Oral History seminar at Portland State University and offered it to other instructors for their classes. I want to thank oral historian Donna Sinclair, Ph.D. for the hundreds of conversations we had about oral history methods, ethics and uses. They have made me the scholar I am today. Together, we conducted oral history projects with communities affected by dam building on the Columbia River (materials are located at the Oregon Historical Society) and with the Chinook Indian Nation (these materials are currently being transferred from www.chinookstory.org to confluence.org) over the course of two decades. Portions of this essay, especially those dealing with oral history methods, are derived from a workbook we compiled for our students and workshop participants. They are used here with Donna Sinclair's permission.

What Oral History (Probably) Is	What Oral History (Probably) Is Not
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dialectic in which an interviewer prompts a narrator with prepared questions based in historical research • A snapshot in time that cannot be replicated • A way to understand how people historicize their own lives and comprehend their pasts • “contingent, constructed, discursive”² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A recorded memoir or monologue that does not include questions or prompts from an interviewer • An interrogation • An interview that does not include questions about past events • Recorded speeches • Wiretapping • Telling stories • “Direct access to authentic experience”³

Put simply, oral history is a process created by a narrator and interviewer that gathers and preserves information about the narrator’s firsthand experiences. It is a course of historical discovery that narrators and interviewers enter voluntarily. It is grounded in historical research and focuses on the past. It is also a methodology in which researchers interpret what and how people remember about the past and how they make sense of their own experiences over time. The best way to understand oral history is to listen to a lot of interviews that other people have conducted and eventually conduct some yourself. Doing so will introduce you to the variety of oral history methodology, the spectrum of what counts as oral history, what most oral historians agree are best practices, and the debates that animate the field.

Typical Steps in an Oral History Process
1. Identify potential narrator and request/schedule an interview time.
2. Conduct a “pre-interview,” a short set of questions that will provide the general contours of the narrator’s experiences.
3. Use the pre-interview to compile research that puts narrator experiences into context and develop a set of questions.
4. Send narrator a note confirming the interview time and place and listing the topics the interview will cover.

² Nan Alamilla Boyd, “Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 2 (May 2008): 182.

³ Alexander Freund, “Under Storytelling’s Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age,” *The Oral History Review*, vol. 42, no 1, (2015): 126.

5. Organize recording equipment (practice with it beforehand), questions, deed of gift, and anything else you will need (i.e., a bottle of water, directions to narrator's home, etc.).
6. Arrive at the interview, greet your narrator, and conduct the interview, making sure that the narrator is comfortable.
7. Once you have finished the interview, ask your narrator to sign the deed of gift and thank her/him.
8. Download the interview file(s) and make a backup. Send a copy of the audio/video file to your narrator.
9. Begin the process of transcribing the interview.
10. Once you have a workable transcript, proof-read it, then send it to your narrator for review.
11. Make revisions to the transcript based on the narrator's feedback.
12. Deposit digital interview files and paperwork (deed of gift, notes on research, questions, etc.) to selected archive.
13. Provide your narrator with the final draft of the transcript.

Professional oral historians typically follow the Oral History Association's guidelines for interviewing a "narrator," a person (or sometimes more than one person) with some personal experience related to an event or period in the past of interest. Oral history interviews are recorded (audio or video or both) at the highest possible quality, often transcribed (the process of typing out an oral recording into a text document), and usually archived at a public institution such as a university library or historical society where future researchers can access the original interview, the transcript, and information about the circumstances under which the interview was conducted.

Oral history projects as well as individual interviews are based on rigorous historical research that informs the kinds of questions asked in interviews and subsequent analysis of the interviews. For example, to conduct interviews with Chinook Nation elders, Jazmine Martinez learned about tribal interactions with the federal government over time, the tribe's lack of federal recognition, and the organizational structure of the tribal government. To interview Anna May Strong, Martinez researched federal census and tribal records to learn as much as she could about Strong's parents and grandparents, read about the Indian boarding school that Strong attended as a youth, and studied the history of nursing in Washington State to ask Strong about her professional life.

Oral historians often conduct individual interviews as part of multi-interview projects, like Martinez did. People who organize oral history projects thoughtfully consider the criteria by which they will determine participants. For example, who in the Chinook Indian community is an "elder"? Who

should be interviewed immediately, and who might be interviewed later in a second phase of a project? And how can the project ensure that those who are interviewed represent the political, social, and experiential spectrum of the community? The Chinook Nation Elders Oral History Project was a collaboration between the Chinook Indian Nation and the Portland State University (PSU) History Department. Members of the Chinook Nation drew up a list of everyone they wanted interviewed and worked with PSU interviewers to identify when and where the interviews would be conducted, and how to contact potential narrators. The project's oral historians interviewed people who were elderly or frail first as well as those who had participated in the community for a significant amount of time or in official capacities.

Jason Ruiz describes how participants for the LGBTQ Twin Cities Oral History Project were solicited: "To recruit participants, we placed an ad in a free weekly alternative newspaper, posted flyers in bars and coffee shops frequented by LGBT clientele, handed out postcards at the Minneapolis pride parade, and received some coverage in the local queer publication. People also heard about the project from their friends who we interviewed. . . . We chose to interview gay-, lesbian-, and bisexual-identified individuals over the age of fifty. . . . We also limited participation to those who had lived in the Twin Cities for at least thirty years"⁴

Oral history interviews are voluntary, so people on the Chinook interview list could choose not to participate. Interviews are also co-constructed, meaning that the session is directed in part by interviewers' questions and topic selections and in part by what narrators want or do not want to share. Self-selection and narrator decisions about what to divulge shape every oral history interview and project. As a result, researchers consider what is omitted as well as what is said, and who is not represented in the project as well as who is.

Oral historians must "respect the rights of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects, to restrict access to the interview, or, under certain circumstances, to choose anonymity," according to the Oral History Association's "Principles and Best Practices."⁵ Oral historians are obligated to reduce risks to narrators that participating in oral history interviews can present. One way to do that is to respect the boundaries that narrators place on interview topics, but there are others as well. For example, interviewers can consult with narrators at the conclusion of each interview, when interviews have been transcribed, and when selections from interviews have been analyzed to ensure the narrators do not object to how their

⁴ Twin Cities GLBT Oral History Project, *Queer Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 8–9, accessed April 21, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctts9w9>.

⁵ Oral History Association, "Principles and Best Practices," accessed April 21, 2023, <https://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices-revised-2009/>.

experiences are characterized. Archivists can make sure that narrators have granted permission for public access to their interviews and transcripts (including the placement of materials online). Researchers who use interviews conducted by others can also make good-faith efforts to contextualize interviews recorded in the past. Collectively, such considerations are part of a bundle of ethical best practices that guide the work of oral historians. Oral history professional organizations adopt and promote such guidelines to protect narrators, interviewers, and the integrity of oral history projects.

Interviews might cover a few events in a person’s life to the entirety of someone’s biography and can last from one to two hours to several sessions over many days. Individual oral histories often comprise open-ended questions that the narrator can answer in many ways. Typically, interviewers avoid asking yes or no questions or leading questions. They avoid interrupting narrators. Initial interviews are often followed up with one or more interviews so that the narrators and interviewers have opportunities to address memories or questions that were prompted initial interviews.

Yes/No Question	Instead of: <i>Did you like school when you were a kid?</i>	<i>Ask: How did you feel about school when you were a kid?</i>
Leading Question	Instead of: <i>Divorces are often hard on children, even adult children. What was your parent’s divorce like for you?</i>	<i>Ask: Can you tell me what you remember about the period when your parents were going through a divorce? What was that like for you?</i>

Many oral historians transcribe their interviews, a painstaking process by which the oral interviews are interpreted into a written text. Transcribing involves translating what was said to what can be read. As a result, transcriptions produce a second form of documentation, different from but similar to the audio (or video) interviews. The example below illustrates what a verbatim transcript might look like when all utterances during an interview have been transcribed. The verbatim transcript was then revised for readability. False starts and verbal ticks like “yeah” and “like” might be reduced or removed altogether. Punctuation and paragraph breaks help to transform what is easy to hear into what is easy to read. At the same time, transcriptionists must take care not to alter narrators’ meaning. Furthermore, other ethical considerations are important at this point in the process. Determining when to transcribe dialect and non-standard grammar, such as “ain’t,” is a decision that shapes how readers respond to narrators. Transcripts are often the point of entrance for an interview once it has been archived and, in many instances, are made quite public through uses described later in this article. Because transcripts may be used to represent a narrator’s views or experiences, interviewers will often ask narrators to review and approve a transcript before it is made public or deposited into an archive. At this point, a narrator can also include additional explanatory information that might clarify aspects of the interview.

Verbatim Transcript	GJ: I was born in South Bend, Washington, um, about one block from where I presently live, and, uh, within a hundred feet of where I have gone to school for eighteen years and uh I was born on May 26, 1941 um came home to a house again within a block of, of the hospital um. My father had purchased it the property was Indian trust land and that’s important to us.
Transcript Revised for Readability	GJ: I was born in South Bend, Washington, about one block from where I presently live and within a hundred feet of where I [went] to school for eighteen years. I was born on May 26, 1941, [and] came home to a house, again, within a block of the hospital. My father had purchased it. The property was Indian trust land and that’s important to us.

In the past, some oral historians would discard or reuse tapes after the interviews had been transcribed, which would prevent future researchers from checking transcriptions against the audio of the interviews. According to current best practices, recorded interviews are widely considered as primary sources and are archived with their transcriptions, which researchers use as reference materials. As it has become increasingly possible to make full audio interviews accessible to mass audiences through digitization, “sound and image will challenge the current dominance of transcription and return aurality to oral history.”⁶

Interviews are useful to researchers because they usually prompt narrators to convey information about events long past, are forged from and shaped by the relationship between the narrators and interviewers, and prompt questions about things absent in the documentary record — such as the origins of a nickname. When Martinez asked Corwan about his nickname, he told her a story about his father, who guided ships in the Pacific Ocean across the dangerous bar at the mouth of the Columbia River. He was renowned for his piloting skills, in good weather and bad — even through the thick fog locals called “pea soup,” the origin of his father’s nickname. When Corwan began his own piloting career, he inherited his father’s nickname.

This description tells us something that would be difficult to know unless you knew Corwan personally or he happened to write down the origin of his nickname, and the written record somehow ended up in an archive for future researchers to find. Oral history interviews, however, must do more than simply add more information about the past to archival collections. Oral historians must determine what

⁶ Alistair Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” *The Oral History Review*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Winter–Spring, 2007): 68.

is historically significant about one person's nickname. When "Soup" Corwan talks about his life, we learn about the role of Native men in piloting ships on the Columbia River, especially at its mouth — something that documentary records show was important from the very period of initial contact with non-Native people. The interview also tells us about the colloquial language used by people who lived on the Washington coast, where describing the texture and thickness of fog was important. We can also learn how Corwan understood himself, as an Indigenous laborer who conducted wage work away from the Quinault Reservation. Martinez's additional questions focused on Corwan's career, a trade that technology has changed dramatically in the last few decades, and his experiences as a tribal fisherman.

Oral history projects are often developed for reasons beyond the collecting and archiving interviews. Historians use oral history interviews as the basis for museum exhibits, podcasts, documentary films, public art installations, public performances, and academic articles and books, among other things. For example, the Santa Fe History Museum used oral histories in interactive kiosks where visitors could listen to clips organized thematically or by region. In the Garden of Surging Waves in Astoria, Oregon, excerpts from oral history interviews have been reproduced in bronze that surround the Moon Gate entrance into the park that memorializes the history of Chinese Americans on the Oregon Coast. The Chinook Nation Elder Oral History Project collected interviews as part of a larger effort to document Chinook Nation history, and they were published on a website (chinookstory.org). Projects such as these are made possible through professional oral history practices and the interviews they produce

A Short History of Oral History

Telling stories about bygone events formed the earliest communications about the past, but professional oral history practice is a much newer development and is part of a dynamic and changing field. Today's oral history practice is shaped by several overlapping events and trends:

- Technological innovations that made it possible to record interviews conducted in the field;
- Collecting practices in archival institutions that fostered oral history projects and preserved interviews;
- The development of oral history as a key methodology in folklore and community studies;
- The growth of social history within academic institutions that emphasized the experiences of everyday people;
- Social justice movements that built critical awareness through the personal experiences of its members.

Technological Innovations. Technological advances have indelibly shaped oral history methods and projects. Oral historians followed the path of other scholars who recorded sound as part of their methodologies. Ethnographers, anthropologists, and folklorists at the end of the nineteenth century

recorded songs, stories, and other sounds as part of their fieldwork. Early equipment such wax cylinders produced low-quality sound, and recordings were limited in length. After World War II, portable tape recorders hit the market. Historians used them to record interviews on magnetic tape using compact cassettes, which produced much higher sound quality than earlier equipment. The relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use equipment made a proliferation of interview projects possible. In Great Britain, the growth of oral history correlated with the growth of radio as the newly formed British Broadcasting Corporation used it to fill airtime on its stations.

Recording technology continued to improve after World War II, including two significant transformations: the introduction of portable video cameras to consumer markets in the 1980s and the digital revolution at the end of the twentieth century.⁷ While many oral historians continue to limit recording to audio, others have embraced video recording oral history interviews. Video-recorded oral histories can complicate ethical questions about interview reproduction and transmission because they can make individuals more recognizable. Video-recorded images also alter the transcription process and raise important questions about how to capture visual information within a written transcript.

At the same time, video recordings capture what audio cannot — nonverbal behaviors, facial expressions, and the physical but silent interactions between narrators and interviewers. In a 1984 article promoting the use of video in oral history, Thomas Charlton listed enhancements that video could bring to an interview: “an interviewee’s wincing facial contortions; animated fingers punctuating statements by gesticulating and stabbing the air; folded arms, crossed legs, or clenched teeth, any of which may indicate negative or threatened feelings; or the smile and facial radiance of sheer joy as a narrator recalls his happiest life experiences.”⁸ Video-recorded interviews can more easily incorporate objects as well. For example, when Albert Lichtblau interviewed a hat maker in her New York home, to illustrate her stories, Mimi Grossberg pulled hats out of her closet that she had designed as a young woman in Vienna before World War II. The hats became an important part of the interview and were captured for future viewers thanks to the video recording.⁹

The digital revolution at the turn of the twentieth century also transformed oral history practices. As storage space became more affordable and easier to access, placing entire audio and video recordings in archives and on publicly accessible servers became increasingly possible. Some oral historians opted to

⁷ One of the earliest publications that addressed the use of video recordings in public history was Brad Jolly’s 1982 book, *Videotaping Local History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982).

⁸ Thomas Charlton, “Videotaped Oral Histories: Problems and Prospects,” *American Archivist* 47, no. 3 (Summer 1984): 232.

⁹ Albert Lichtblau’s “Case Study: Opening Up Memory Space: The Challenges of Audiovisual History” describes interviewing poet and hat maker Mimi Grossberg in her New York home where she used hats to talk about her work life. Donald Ritchie, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

make audio or video of the interviews accessible so that listeners or viewers could hear and see for themselves the verbal ticks and facial expressions that might not have been captured in transcriptions. Moreover, scholars can analyze digital files with software that captures data across interviews for comparative purposes, creating new paths to interpretation. Because technology is so tied to the collection and preservation of oral history interviews, it is imperative that practitioners consult with staff where interview files will ultimately be archived.

Institutional & Academic Collecting Practices. Archivist Allan Nevins is often attributed with having started the first organized oral history project in 1948 at Columbia University. Nevins worried that telephone conversations would outpace written communication, resulting in the creation of fewer documents such as letters. If important decisions were made during telephone calls rather than through written communication, how those decisions were arrived at could be lost to the historical record. As a remedy, Nevins conducted interviews with influential people as a way to enhance the paper documents donated to archival institutions. In other words, he used oral history interviews to capture information that might otherwise be lost as a result of the advent of a new technology — the telephone.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, thousands of archives, libraries, organizations, and agencies developed oral history programs around the world. Governmental agencies such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. District Court of Oregon documented their history through oral interviews to augment written information about their past procedures, policies, and projects. In 1986, for example, the Hawaiian State Legislature allocated funds for a project that collected “forty-two former office holders, aides, appointees, party organizers, union officials, lobbyists, and political observers who share their perspectives on territorial and state politics.”¹⁰ Collectively, the interviews chart the diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds of the state’s candidates and Hawaii’s transition away from Republican dominance as voters increasingly identified as independent. Such a project can bring to light new details and information as well as the reflections of individuals who do not typically make it into an otherwise robust written record related to state government.

By the 1960s and 1970s, historians turned to oral interviews as a way to create primary documents about people who were often under-represented in traditional archival sources — women and minority communities, the working class, LGBT communities, among other groups. These interview projects focused on documenting the experiences of people absent in archives. Social historians pointed out that the experiences of non-elite people were often significantly different from those people whose

¹⁰ Center for Oral History, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of Hawaii, Manoa, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://oralhistory.hawaii.edu/>.

lives were usually captured in traditional archival records. Oral historians Sue Armitage and Sherna Gluck argued that interviews with women were essential in a world “where women’s oppression is reinforced by the silencing of women’s voices and histories.”¹¹ Oral history projects could fill a void in the historical record and bring to light what was often invisible and therefore absent from narratives about the past.

Belinda Bozzoli and Mmantho Nkotsae aimed to fill a gap in the archival record when they interviewed twenty-two women in the South African free settlement of Phokeng, collecting stories from underrepresented women in a community that was rarely covered in history books. Nkotsae, who conducted the interviews, was simply charged with recording “the stories of those whose lives are hidden from history.”¹² She organized her interviews as conversations between generations; she was a young graduate student from a similar community and her narrators were elders who could teach her lessons from their own lives. Collectively, the interviews illuminated “the way of life in early peasant and sharecropping households, the standard of living attained, the sexual division of labour that prevailed, the history of schooling, family relations, ethnic divisions...”¹³ Oral historian Sherna Berger Gluck argues that: “Women’s oral history is a feminist encounter, even if the interviewee is not herself a feminist. It is the creation of a new type of material on women; it is the validation of women’s experiences; it is the communication among women of different generations; it is the discovery of our own roots and the development of a continuity that has been denied us in traditional historical accounts.”¹⁴

By the 1970s, oral historians were using newly formed journals and conferences to reflect on how to develop rapport with narrators, what kinds of questions were most likely to evoke thoughtful and detailed responses, and their own responsibilities to the people they interviewed. New professional organizations developed guidelines for oral history practitioners, focusing on “the value of preparation; the need to establish rapport and intimacy, to listen, to ask open-ended questions, and to refrain from interrupting; the importance of allowing for pauses and silences, avoiding jargon, probing, and minimizing the presence of the tape recorder.”¹⁵ As with other methodologies, oral history practices

¹¹ Alistair Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” *The Oral History Review*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Winter–Spring, 2007): 53.

¹² Belinda Bozzoli, “Interviewing the Women of Phokeng,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed., Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 156.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁴ Sherna Berger Gluck, “What’s So Special about Women?: Women’s Oral History,” in *Women’s Oral History: The ‘Frontiers’ Reader*, eds. Susan Armitage with Patricia Hart and Karen Weathermon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 5.

¹⁵ Alistair Thomson, “Fifty Years On: An International Perspective on Oral History,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 85, no. 2 (Sept. 1998): 581–95.

continually change and develop to meet new technological, legal, and ethical challenges, and because historians themselves have new questions and find new ways to do their work.

Guidelines for the Practice — The 4 Ps of Oral History¹⁶	
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews are guided by historical research that allows the interviewer to place a narrator’s experience into historical context. • Interviewers discuss the scope and purpose of the interview(s) with the potential narrator. • Interviewers conduct a preliminary interview with the narrator to ensure that she can speak to the foci of the overall project.
Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewers conduct practice interviews with friends and family. • Interviewers listen to interviews conducted by others to pick up strategies and tools. • Interviewers listen to their own interviews and contemplate what worked and what didn’t. They are reflective practitioners.
Posterity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewers consider the quality of their recordings, minimizing ambient noises and keeping their own verbal ticks to a minimum. • Interviewers use the best equipment they can afford and consult with archivists to determine how to create durable recordings. • Interviewers consider placing materials online and in other formats useable to future researchers.
Preservation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewers carefully consider where to deposit interviews so that they are accessible to the public. • Interviewers work with archivists to ensure that they have the paperwork — deed of gift, etc. — necessary to turn interviews over to an archive.

Oral History as an Activist Methodology. Historians have frequently used oral history methodology to map social movements of the past, but activists have also used oral history interviewing techniques to

¹⁶ This table originated with oral historian Donna Sinclair.

galvanize current social movements; their efforts predate many of the oral history techniques developed by archivists and social historians. In the 1930s, Myles Horton founded the Highlander Folk School where adult participants learned to “value their own experience, to analyze their own experience, and to know how to make decisions,” by publicly telling stories about their lives.¹⁷ Located in Tennessee, the school’s workshops — attended by Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., among many others — influenced union movements beginning in the 1930s and the civil rights movement after World War II. Daniel Kerr, an oral historian who argues that the activist roots of oral history must be recovered and remembered, points out that “more central to our practice than our production of recordings, transcripts, collections, articles, and monographs, is the fact that we facilitate dialogues grounded in personal experiences and interpretive reflections of the past.”¹⁸

Through the interview process, many narrators come to better understand patterns within their lives and how external forces shaped their experiences and opportunities, reflections that can infuse and inform social movements dedicated to societal transformation. The Highlander Folk School inspired the use of personal narrative by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s; the Massachusetts History Workshop, which brought academic labor historians together with union activists and workers in the late 1970s and 1980s; and Groundswell, which was founded in 2011 and whose diverse members employ oral history “in order to build the creativity and power of social justice movements.”¹⁹ Daniel Kerr, a founding member of Groundswell and an academic oral historian, interviewed hundreds of houseless people in Cleveland, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., arguing that “oral history proved to be a powerful tool for initiating change.”²⁰ That hoped-for change — to better house people — was external to Kerr’s narrators but also internal in that narrators came to understand their own experiences and individual agency by describing their experiences to trained listeners.

“Oral history projects were the medium we used to begin individual and group dialogues with working people. These experiences enabled us to expand the dialogue in less private settings to experiment with a movement inspired version of public history.” — James Green one of the founders of the Massachusetts History Workshop²¹

¹⁷ Quoted in Daniel Kerr, “Allan Nevins is Not My Grandfather: The Roots of Radical Oral History Practice in the United States,” *Oral History Review*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2016): 372.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 371.

¹⁹ Groundswell, Oral History for Social Change, accessed April 21, 2023, <http://www.oralhistoryforsocialchange.org/about/>.

²⁰ Kerr, “Allan Nevins is Not My Grandfather,” 368.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 380.

Medical care givers have also tapped into the positive effects that conducting oral history interviews can have for narrators by folding oral history projects into palliative or end of life care. Beginning in 2007, volunteers at the Northern General Hospital in Shettfield, England, began interviewing people in hospice care under the supervision of hospital staff. After five years, project sponsors analyzed the experiences of interviewees, their families, and their care givers to determine what, if any, benefits were derived from the experience of being interviewed. Researchers for the project concluded that:

- Oral history is an opportunity to reflect on life, from a personal perspective, without having to write;
- People with a life-threatening illness value being able to express their identity and talk about themselves with no time limit or medical agenda;
- Interviewees consider the oral history process validating, dignified and social;
- Family and friends told us that the most important aspect of oral history in palliative care is the creation of a voice recording as a lasting memory;
- Health care professionals appreciate oral history; they see it as a beneficial complement to clinical care.²²

Oral history interviews conducted within projects related to social justice or community health may not be archived or made publicly accessible; the point of the interviews is not to document the past as much as it is to provoke personal or societal changes in the present. Kerr archived the oral history interviews he conducted with houseless people in Cleveland and Washington, D.C., but interviews conducted within the auspices of social movements are often not professionally archived and may not even be recorded.

Volunteers at the Northern General Hospital offer voice recordings to narrator family members, and health care professionals have access to the interviews, but this oral history project, like those adopted by social movement organizations, is designed with goals other than archival posterity — more immediate goals of identity formation, reflection, and social change.

As a subfield of public history, oral history sits at the confluence of several developments, including technological innovations, the desire among historians to develop sources beyond those typically available within the archives, and a process that allows for essential reflection on one's own life and transformative social change.

²² “Oral History in Palliative Care,” Health Sciences School, University of Sheffield, accessed April 21, 2023; M. Winslow, “Taking Oral Histories to Improve End-of-life Care,” *Nursing Times*, vol. 111, no. 15 (January 2015): 21.; “Dr. Michelle Winslow Discusses Oral History in Palliative and End-of-Life Care at the 2017 Oral History Summer Institute,” June 23, 2017, Columbia Center for Oral History Research, Columbia University, accessed April 21, 2023, <http://www.ccohr.incite.columbia.edu/blog/2017/6/23/dr-michelle-winslow-discusses-oral-history-in-palliative-and-end-of-life-care-at-the-2017-oral-history-summer-institute>.

What Kind of Historical Sources are Oral Histories?

Oral history interviews never simply tell listeners what happened in the past or what it was like to live in decades gone by. Rather, interviews are historical sources that are constructed by narrators and interviewers who use a dialectical format — question and answer — to develop a narrative about the past. The same narrator interviewed by someone else or on a different day or under different circumstances (at the onset of an illness, for example) would record a different interview. As one oral historian put it, “interviews and life stories are never static, but living things that have tended to take shape before our very eyes.”²³ At the same time, interviews are “talking for the record” and accepted as evidence about the past.

Interviews give people, many of whom may have never thought their lives were historically significant, an opportunity to shape their identity for public consumption. Because interviews ask narrators to recount events about their own lives for posterity, narrators may want to obscure aspects of the past, intentionally distorting the historical record with answers that are not fully truthful. Narrators may also seek to protect family members, friends, or people within their community who would be put at risk through the telling of some recollections. Oral historian Sandy Polishuk writes that “everyone, consciously or unconsciously, creates a persona to present to the world, a face that may be different depending on the context and the audience.”²⁴

Polishuk interviewed labor activist and radical organizer Julia Ruuttila for 33 hours over 17 sessions for *Sticking to the Union: An Oral History of the Life and Times of Julia Ruuttila*. What she found was that Ruuttila created her own life story, which was grounded in actual events but that also distorted them — “everyone has secrets,” Polishuk reminded her readers.²⁵ Among other fictional claims Ruuttila made in her interviews was that father was a direct descendant of a slave, and that he had moved west in order to pass as white. Ruuttila, who presented as white, used this story to shock her neighbors and acquaintances when they made racist comments in her presence. Polishuk attributed this fiction to Ruuttila’s “desire to identify with the underdog.”²⁶ As Ruuttila grew to trust Polishuk, she revealed that some of her stories about her life were fictional creations. Polishuk learned of other secrets through her research and by interviewing people who knew Ruuttila, while also recognizing her narrator’s right to keep aspects of her life private.

²³ Jason Ruiz, “Queering Oral History” in *Queer Twin Cities*, 6.

²⁴ Sandy Polishuk, *Sticking to the Union: An Oral History of the Life and Times of Julia Ruuttila* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶ Sandy Polishuk, “Julia Rutilla, 1907–1991,” *The Oregon Encyclopedia*, accessed April 21, 2023, https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/ruuttila_julia_1907_1991/#.WoXGCFQ-cWo.

“We have approached the life stories that we collect as texts rather than historical truth. We never saw this to be an empirical project. . . . we see the life stories that we collect to reflect the murky relationships between history, memory, and the construction of identity.” Jason Ruiz, LGBTQ Twin Cities Oral History Project²⁷

Even with narrators who are trying to be as accurate as possible, questions about the validity of memory are often entangled in discussions of oral history as evidence. Individuals can remember events in their past inaccurately, collapsing several events into one or losing clarity of the details. Entire communities can remember events erroneously, sometimes purposefully as official stories take the place of individual memory. Alessandro Portelli interviewed 200 people about the German execution of 335 Italian men in 1944 during the Nazi occupation of Rome. During the interview, Portelli determined that an account, which placed blame on resisters to Nazism and was carefully crafted by Germans and fascist Italians, was in error. How people remembered and memorialized the events reflected their concerns at the time and their political preferences when they were interviewed. For Portelli, this complication yielded opportunities for analysis. “Even when [interviews] do not tell the events as they occurred,” he wrote, “the discrepancies and the errors are themselves events, clues for the work of desire and pain over time, for the painful search for meaning.”²⁸

Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis described how they assessed their completed interviews in the book that culminated their project, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*. The two researchers conducted interviews with working-class lesbian narrators in Buffalo, New York, over the course of thirteen years. Once they started analyzing their interviews, they sought out non-oral sources that corroborated information their narrators told them. When they could, they cross-checked dates and other factual information their narrators reported in written sources. They also identified patterns across interviews. If five or ten narrators described events in similar ways or suggested a particular analysis of a period with some consistency, the researchers felt they had tapped into a “greater reality” than from a single interview, one that could be verified within the community of narrators.

At the same time, Kennedy and Davis carefully considered how *who* they interviewed shaped their findings. Would some people declining to participate skew their analysis? Moreover, did the researchers place more value on narrators with whom they shared a rapport or whose experiences they

²⁷ Jason Ruiz, “Queering Oral History” in *Queer Twin Cities*, 6.

²⁸ Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and the Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 16.

could more readily understand? Finally, Kennedy and Davis took their findings back to their narrators repeatedly to find out if they reflected their own understandings. “Research return,” a phrase used to describe this kind of community-based analysis, often distinguishes historical narratives developed from oral, rather than standard archival, sources. Regardless of the details of their methods, researchers, oral historians among them, work to eliminate bias from their work, reflect on the shortcomings of their research projects, and account for how those shortcomings might affect their analysis.

Portelli identifies the characteristics that distinguish oral interviews from other kinds of historical sources:

- They are *oral*, not written, sources;
- They are *narrative* sources that often incorporate imagination (what *could* have happened), speculation, and emotion, and the speaker is subjective;
- They help us understand the meaning, rather than the actual details, of an event. The interview does not provide a window to the past;
- They are co-constructed by narrators and interviewers. Narrators do not speak for themselves;
- They are *not objective*; they manifest out of the relationship between narrator and interviewer — an interview cannot be the same twice;
- They are always incomplete.²⁹

As with other empirical evidence — letters, organizational meeting minutes, governmental documents — historians must use oral history interviews critically, taking into consideration the circumstances under which interviews were conducted and what interviews can and cannot illuminate about past events and historical periods. Some researchers worry that interviewers can shape the responses they get from narrators through subtly biased questions. Others fret that oral history narrators can obscure the truth in their interviews, place themselves at the center of events, intentionally or unintentionally fictionalize details about past events they do not remember well, or remain silent about important details. Most researchers share similar concerns about the primary documents they use. “No testimony provides unfiltered access to the past,” historian Alexander Freund reminds us. “All memory is filtered by time and intervening experience.”³⁰ It is up to researchers to determine the validity of their sources and how best to use them.

²⁹ Adapted from Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” *History Workshop*, no. 12 (Autumn 1981): 96–107.

³⁰ Alexander Freund, “Under Storytelling’s Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age,” *The Oral History Review*, vol. 42, no 1, (2015): 127.

Why do Oral History?

To create an oral history collection takes a considerable investment of resources. A project requires that an individual or team define its perimeters, identify suitable narrators, conduct research that informs the questions, contact narrators and develop questions for each individual, schedule and conduct one or more interviews, transcribe the interviews, consult with narrators about transcriptions, and work with an archival repository to preserve the interviews and ancillary materials for future use. This does not count historians' work to analyze interviews and use them in books, exhibits, podcasts, and other formats. So why do we collect oral history interviews? To answer that question, the following case studies examine how oral history collections have informed and transformed how historians document and interpret LGBTQ history and the history of Indian boarding schools.

Case Study: Documenting LGBTQ Communities

There are few works in this twenty-five-year field that do not depend heavily on oral history methods.³¹

Mbuya Chikwizi, a traditional healer from the Chipinge District in Zimbabwe, interviewed in 1998 by Walter Zimunya as part of the Gay Oral History Project of the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe.

I was born seventy-two years ago here in Chipinge, and I remember that during my early childhood, I would say I was twelve or fourteen years old, we had a woman in our area who was called "Sa Changana" where we would go as girls to get advice. At her place we also learnt that there were girls who did not have any feelings to sleep with men and they would get their own advice about how to deal with their way of life. However, since I was not one of them, I cannot tell what type of advice they would get. This situation was never really talked of within society, but we would know who these girls were. The same with men or boys. They would seek advice on what to do as well, so I would say gays have been around for a long time. Before, though, it was taboo to talk about it.

When Marc Epprecht entered the meeting room to ask members of the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GLAZ, founded in 1989) to support an oral history project in the mid-1990s, he was met with some skepticism — why would a straight, white, Canadian historian want to interview men and women who identified as homosexual? Embedded in their concern was the knowledge that they were a minority group singled out for legal and extra-legal harassment in the southern African nation, including from the nation's president Robert Mugabe, who served from 1980 to 2017. Mugabe publicly denounced

³¹ Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 2 (May 2008): 177.

homosexuality, demanding that if citizens “see people parading themselves as Lesbians and Gays, arrest them and hand them over to the police!”³² Epprecht garnered support for his project as he embraced a community-based participatory research model that trained members of GALZ to conduct interviews and allowed them to shape the scope of the project. As a result, they documented the specific southern African traditions and understandings of homosexuality and the history of homosexuality in the nation. Their work helped to undermine common characterizations of homosexuality as a foreign and “un-African” practice. “A striking element of these interviews,” according to Epprecht, “is how forthcoming ‘ordinary’ Zimbabweans can be about homosexuality. . . . a noteworthy contrast to the virulent homophobia of many of Zimbabwe’s mission-educated leaders.”³³

Homosexual behavior has long been criminalized in Zimbabwe, but in 2006, in part as a reaction to organizations like GLAZ, any behaviors that appeared to indicate homosexuality (such as holding hands) could lead to arrest. Zimbabwe is an extreme example of the implementation of homophobic policy, but behavior that falls outside of heterosexual norms has been criminalized throughout the world. At various points in the recent past, many nations have defined non-heterosexual orientation as pathological. Although this is changing in many parts of the world, most people suspected of non-conforming sexuality have been at risk of losing their jobs, families and friends, religious communities, homes, and children. They have faced physical violence as well as social censure, and as a result, the “closet” and secrecy has been critical for the survival of generations of people who identify as LGBTQ. Conducting oral histories under circumstances such as those in Zimbabwe would have been daunting because of the risks participants took to discuss not just their sex lives and desires but to discuss lives and desires that have been so vilified.

Oral history projects such as GLAZ’s have joined social justice organizing and legal efforts to shift perceptions about human sexuality in profound ways. Oral history is critical to the development of the histories of sexual minorities because it provides a “corrective to medical, state, and legal discourses that have historically framed same-sex desire as pathological.”³⁴ In other words, compiling the specific experiences of individuals provides perspectives that counter the homophobic-inflected sources that

³² “Lesbian and Gay Zimbabwe,” *Gay Times*, archived on the Wayback Machine, September 29, 2006, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060929212649/http://www.gaytimes.co.uk/gt/listings.asp?action=ShowCountry&CID=1052>.

³³ Marc Epprecht, “The Gay Oral History Project in Zimbabwe: Black Empowerment, Human Rights, and the Research Process,” *History in Africa*, vol. 26 (1999), 36. Epprecht published his findings in *Hungochani: The History of Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (Montreal and Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Elspeth H. Brown, “Trans/Feminist Oral History: Current Projects,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 4 (November 2015): 667.

dominate much that has been written about human sexuality. Today, there are thousands of projects being conducted all over the world that are similar to the one implemented by GALZ. Collectively, they have had significant impacts: they help communities understand and reflect on their own histories, they galvanize efforts toward the rights of sexual minorities, and they have provided evidence for an entire sub-field of historical study. Moreover, by collecting information about the diversity of experiences regarding sexuality, oral history projects have aided in the movement away from homo-hetero binary toward a spectrum of queerness and gender identity.

Because oral history methods are so important to those developing LBGTQ historiography, researchers who interview queer people have important experiences to offer oral historians more generally. Oral historian Nan Alamilla Boyd points out that practitioners who work on LBGTQ oral history projects often incorporate feminist research methods that decenter credentialed experts. She writes that “feminist researchers try to empower (rather than exploit) historical narrators by trusting their voices, positioning narrators as historical experts, and interpreting narrators’ voices alongside their narrators’ interpretations of their own memories.”³⁵ Feminist research methods help oral historians to think through a critical problem that faces oral historians who conduct interviews with narrators who identify as LBGTQ: how to chart the effects of socially constructed identities in ways that do not simply affirm or reinstate the hierarchical distinctions they create. Historians argue, for example, that the heterosexual-homosexual binary constructed by the medical establishment is a dangerous fiction based on perceived difference that directs privilege to some people while denying it to others. By interviewing people about this binary, do oral historians help to ensure that it persists? This is a critical problem for all oral historians. As Boyd argues, LBGTQ history would not exist in its present state without the intervention of thousands of oral historians who have collected innumerable interviews that have collectively transformed how we understand the history of gender and sexuality through individual experiences.

Case Study: Telling Stories About American Indian Boarding Schools & Child Removal

*To enter the world of the boarding school, to understand the particularly unique society experienced and created by Indian students, one cannot rely solely on documentary evidence preserved in dusty gray boxes in the Federal Archives. The reality of that world, of that life, remains better preserved in the living memory of the former boarding school students themselves.*³⁶

³⁵ Nan Alamilla Boyd, “Who is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 17, no. 2 (May 2008): 177–78.

³⁶ K. Tsianina Lomawaima, “Oral Histories from Chilocco Indian Agricultural School, 1920–1940,” *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 241.

“Pauline,” an anonymous narrator attended Chilocco in 1929, when she was sixteen and in eleventh grade. After she graduated, she worked at the school. That she pursued attending boarding school may explain why she remembered her experiences positively.³⁷

So I had a cousin going to Chilocco at that time, and she said, well why don't you come up here and go with me. So I said, O.K., I'd like to. So my Mom and Dad got me enrolled, I was one-fourth Cherokee. I spent two years at Chilocco and they were the happiest two years of my life, because I learned how to cook, I learned how to sew, I learned how to entertain, and I learned manners, and how to clean house, how to iron, how to wash, how to work in different things, you know, they taught me those things.

In 1994, K. Tsianina Lomawaima's book, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School*, changed how readers understood the history of Indian boarding schools in the United States. Federally sponsored American Indian boarding schools were designed to forcibly assimilate Native Americans into mainstream American society. Federal officials removed children (sometimes forcibly) from their homes and placed them in schools distant from their families and communities. Children who spoke their native languages or continued their traditional customs were often punished. Education focused on vocational training, including the practice of hiring out Indian children into non-Native homes. Most schools were organized in a military-like fashion.

Past historians who limited their research to archival sources often found that their work reflected official observers such as school superintendents and other Indian boarding school administrators. Official records are replete with the insights, observations, and comments of those administrators — people who ran or taught at the schools — and bereft of the voices of those most affected by boarding school policies, students and their parents. Through archival research, those historians could produce solid documentation of the schools' administration but could provide little insight on what it might be like to attend such schools.

To recover the experiences of students to the historical record, Lomawaima interviewed 61 people who attended Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma as children during the 1920s through 1940s, including her father, Curtis Carr. Lomawaima's personal connection to the school may have induced other former students to talk with her. Those interviews complicated how people viewed boarding school experiences. Some students were traumatized by the forced removal from their families and communities, but they also created new communities with other students and resisted the totalizing pressures to assimilate by secretly practicing their Indigenous languages, telling each other tribal and family stories, and refusing to cooperate with teachers and administrators. Others had fond recollections of particular

³⁷ Ibid, 245–46.

teachers and administrators or spoke appreciatively of the opportunities that their education afforded them. For many, the experiences were deeply mixed. The interviews restored to the historical record the personal autonomy and individual experiences of the children who were students at the Chilocco Indian School.

Oral histories conducted with former students of Indian boarding schools helped researchers understand the students' experiences and how they have come to understand those experiences as adults. Former students may not remember specific events on particular dates, but they can recall whether they liked a teacher, what the food was like, and how they felt when they first arrived. Their narratives also reveal how former students navigated assimilationist pressures and formed friendships and alliances with fellow classmates. Several of the former students Lomawaima interviewed fondly recalled playing in the woods around the school grounds. "We covered that place like a blanket," recalled Lomawaima's father, Curtis Carr, who was nine when he entered the school in 1927.

Participating in oral history interviews can also provoke painful memories for narrators; yet recollecting how they navigated difficult circumstances can aid in the healing of past trauma. To that end, a national coalition formed the National Boarding School Healing Project in 2011 to document boarding school experiences among Native people. Denise Lajimodiere interviewed her father, who went to Chemawa Boarding School in Oregon, among other former boarding school students as part of this project. She reported that some aspects common to oral history practice, such as providing narrators with opportunities to review their interview transcripts, were difficult for participants who did not want to relive the trauma twice, once in the initial interview and a second time in reviewing materials related to the interview. Lajimodiere's experiences remind us that oral history process is always situational and what might work for one kind of project might not work for another. This use of oral history interviewing also echoes earlier uses by civil rights and labor activists to promote healing and raise awareness among the people who tell their stories.

As the case studies demonstrate, oral history interviews can be powerful tools: they can bring new information to light, illuminate individual experiences of people who are not well represented in archival sources, aid in individuals understanding their own past experiences, and provide the foundations for social movements and shared identities. They are also co-constructed sources — requiring both a narrator and an interviewer — and they provide a snapshot in time, even for narrators who have well-worn stories about themselves. Oral history interviews are deeply personal research documents that capture personal recollections and contextualize narrators' place in a broader historical narrative. They are complex documents that represent complex relationships between narrators and interviewers. Because of these characteristics, oral historians take such care to work ethically and with respect toward the people they interview.

Ethical & Legal Issues

Oral history interviews are at once deeply personal recitations of individual experiences and publicly accessible research documents. Just think about it from a narrator's perspective. The narrator sits down with a single interviewer and shares significant parts of her life, which are recorded. A researcher transcribes the recording and places it and the recording into an archive, where both are placed online. Now the narrator's colleagues, relatives, friends, and neighbors can listen to the interview and read the transcript. Researchers can incorporate the narrator's stories into articles and books, students might use the interview as evidence in college papers, a documentarian might be granted permission to excerpt a portion of the interview into a film. During an interview, it is surprisingly easy to forget that it is being recorded, and what started off feeling like a conversation between two people may eventually be broadcast to the world. Narrators are brave to share their stories so broadly, and oral historians should minimize the risks posed by sharing those stories. Some of the tools that oral historians have developed to minimize risks to narrators include best practices guidelines, informed consent forms and deeds of gift, and research return practices that allow for ongoing communication between narrators and interviewers.

The development of professional and federal research guidelines was a response to egregious cases in which researchers disregarded the rights of people — namely, their research subjects. Perhaps the most infamous example was a case where U.S. Public Health Service researchers studied the effects of syphilis on hundreds of African American sharecroppers over several decades, beginning in 1932. Researchers initially did not share the syphilis diagnosis with the men enrolled in the study and allowed them to go untreated, *without their knowledge — and thereby without their consent*. Treatment was withheld from the men even after the penicillin showed positive results in treating the disease. The study was finally shut down in 1972 after a whistleblower brought it to public attention. This case led the federal government to develop institutional review boards (IRBs) through which any federally funded research on “human subjects” (people) had to be approved, only after safeguards were put in place to protect participants from potential harm.

A core principle of IRBs is “informed consent,” meaning that people who agree to be studied in some way participate only after they have been told the purpose and process of the study. Because many university IRBs required anonymity of human subjects, in 2006 the American Association of University Professors declared that oral history projects should not require a review by the IRB. In the intervening years, review boards have become more understanding about the specific needs of oral historians, and many have since either not required the IRB stamp of approval or have set up expedited processes for oral

history. Likewise, informed consent, voluntary participation, and the narrators' ability to place restrictions on the completed interview and transcript are important components of oral history best practices.

Archivists and oral historians use forms variously called legal releases, deeds of gift, and donor forms to transfer copyright of interviews from narrators and interviewers (and anyone else who can be heard or seen in the interview) to the archival institution. U.S. copyright law (Copyright Act of 1976) deems that those whose voices or images appear on a recording, hold a legal right to the recorded materials. For oral historians' purposes, this means that narrators and interviewers both hold the copyright to an interview. In other words, both interviewers and the narrators must give the interview to an archive. The deed of gift may also specify how the interview can be used and place restrictions on use of portions or all of the interview. For example, narrators may ask that interviews be restricted from public access for a set number of years, or that interviews not be used for commercial purposes. Once narrators and interviewers sign the deed of gift, interviews become the property of the designated archive. Most of the time, archives can readily enforce restrictions, but they may not stand up to legal challenge. John Neuenschwander, author of *A Guide to Oral History and the Law*, advises oral historians to be familiar with the limits of agreements such as deeds of gift in their own countries and local areas so that they can accurately communicate the degree to which the restrictions can be legally upheld.

A notorious and ongoing case illustrates the limits of confidentiality and restrictions placed on access to interviews. In 2000, as part of the Belfast Project, researchers associated with Boston College began collecting oral history interviews with people on both sides of the Irish conflict that took place from the late 1960s to 1998. Researchers knew that the interviews might include highly sensitive information that could put some of their narrators at significant legal risk. Some of the interviews included incriminating information, including about serious crimes such as kidnapping and murder. To protect narrators, researchers promised that the identity of participants would remain confidential until they were deceased. The United Kingdom, however, worked with the U.S. Attorney General to have some tapes turned over to the court beginning in 2011, arguing that they might contain evidence pertinent to an ongoing murder investigation. The subpoenas pitted the researchers, who sought to protect their narrators and the integrity of the project, against the university, which eventually turned some tapes over to comply with the law. As of January 2018, the tapes were under court seal as their use was being adjudicated.

Most oral history projects do not contain the kind of information collected by the Belfast Project and do not pose significant legal ramifications for participants. Nonetheless, the success of oral history interviewing rests on the trust developed between narrators and interviewers (who represent the broader oral history project). Interviewers can build trust with narrators by clearly communicating project goals, sharing a project timeline, and explaining how the interview might be used in the future. By providing information about the project, interviewers help to ensure that narrators agree to projects that they fully

understand. A disruption of trust may not only affect an individual interview; it can also affect the ability of future researchers to conduct further interviews within a community.

Transcription Sample & Questions for Analysis

Once an interview has been conducted, researchers use a variety of methods to analyze and interpret it. Valerie Yow's *Recoding Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* provides guiding questions and examples of how she has interpreted individual interviews and is worth seeking out. Use the following questions/prompts to analyze the oral history excerpt below:³⁸

- What life/familial/occupational or other roles does the narrator describe playing?
- How does the narrator describe the principal turnings in his or her life and how does the narrator describe means of adaption to challenges or changes?
- What are the significant categories of things, people, and events in a narrative and what characterize them?
- What are the sociological and cultural structures (i.e., federal Indian education) within which the narrator's life unfolds?
- Search for key phrases. What might they mean?

Narrator: Anna May Strong (AS); Margaret Payne (MP)

Interviewers: Katy Barber (KB) & Melissa Swank (MS)

Date: January 29, 2012

Location: Raymond, Washington

Transcribed by: Katy Barber, July 13, 2012

Edited for publication by: Katy Barber June 30, 2017

Two audio files, 181 minutes, 22 seconds = three hours and two minutes of interview

AS: The word got to mom, the mothers some way, I don't know how they were told but they were told to take all of us kids to the Cushman Indian hospital in Tacoma. We had to have our tonsils removed. My dad owned the school bus and he took me and Carlton, Sonny and Bud, and Gloria and Kenneth, all six of us and we went up there and stayed. We had to stay overnight and they did the tonsillectomies.

Oh, I know what I skipped now. I skipped the part where, when Mom was in school. She went to the Bay Center school but then she was probably was twelve, thirteen – somewhere in there. The other kids

³⁸ Adapted from Valerie Yow, *Recoding Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3rd ed., New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

went to Chemawa [Indian School] in Oregon but Mom went to Tulalip [Indian Boarding School] because there was a teacher up there who was also a close friend of my grandpa's family. They had scholastics half of the day and a trade, something to make a living with, and Mom took the bakery. That's how she learned to make all her lovely breads.

All kinds of yummy things and, dumb daughter, do I know how to make bread? Buns, cream puffs and all of those good things. Can't even bake a soda biscuit without wrecking it! But, anyway, that's what Mom did and she was up there in school but she had to come home because Grandma turned so bad. She never got to go back and finish. Um, it was the Indian school grounds and you couldn't leave the grounds. They had, uh, matrons. Is that the words? That watched to observe their behavior and if they misbehaved they got demerits and one of the demerits was, if you did something wrong that they disapproved, you scrubbed the hallways even if they weren't dirty. You got down on your hands and knees and scrubbed them. Um, but they, the way they could get off the grounds was if they attended the Catholic church which was outside the Indian school grounds and Mom and, I don't know, Rachel Charley, that's how Mom and her were friends because she was there too and they misbehaved. I don't know what they were doing. Mom didn't give the details but the Catholic priest called them Bay Center heathens because of their behavior. They had to stop it. He made them stop but they got a bad name, made a bad name for where they had come from.

The collection of oral history interviews – a deeply dialectical and shared process – can be richly rewarding for the practitioner and the narrator, and can expand the historical record and its interpretation. Understanding the principles and best practices of conducting oral history is the first step in creating this important form of historical documentation, but practice is the best way to gain experience.