

The Vietnam Archive  
Oral History Workshop

# Oral History Workshop

## *Objectives*

- What is Oral History?
- Guidelines for conducting Oral History Interviews
- Do's and Don'ts of Oral History
- Understanding good techniques for conducting Oral History Interviews

# What is Oral History?

- Literally
- Figuratively
- Who are the players and what are their roles?

# What is Oral History? Literally...

“Oral history is a method of gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life. It is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s.”

Oral History Association

# What is Oral History? Figuratively...

Conducting an oral history interview is like being a detective or reporter:

- You must be inquisitive (**The five W's +**)
- You must strive to find the truth
- You must focus on the other person, not yourself
- You must be fair and thorough to accomplish your tasks well.

# The Five W's +

- Who? (was involved)
- What? (happened)
- Where? (did it happen)
- When? (did it happen)
- Why? (did it happen)
- How? (are the above significant)

# Oral History Demystified

- Have you ever done the equivalent of an oral history interview before?
- Have you ever been interviewed before?
- Why is this important?

# Players and Roles

- Narrator
- Interviewer
- History
- Audience

# Narrator

- This is the person being interviewed and is a large part of the reason for the interview in the first place. You should interview only one narrator at a time.
- Role: The role of the narrator is to provide an accurate, honest, and unvarnished version of events in which they were involved.

# Interviewer

- The person asking the questions and running the recording equipment.
- Role: The role of the interviewer is to organize the interview, make sure the equipment is in proper working order, and guide the narrator through the interview without detracting from the story being told.

# History: The Context of the Interview

- History plays two roles by establishing two contexts:
  - Personal: How do the local and personal experiences of the narrator affect their particular perceptions and interpretations of events?
  - General: What are the larger issues and events far removed from the daily life of the narrator which affect their lives, perceptions, and interpretations of events?

# Audience

The reason for conducting an oral history interview is to preserve a record of events that might not otherwise be available to this or future generations. Ultimately, the oral history interview created by you and the narrator will affect peoples' perceptions and interpretations of historical events.

(In other words, it is to this group that you and the narrator have a tremendous responsibility and obligation. )

# Why Oral History?

- Oral history gathers data that is often not available in other written sources or records.
- Oral history integrates personal, human experience into larger historical and sociological accounts.
- Oral history can reveal how individual values and actions shaped the past, and how the past shapes present-day values and actions.
- Oral history can help create a stronger bond and understanding between younger and older generations.

# How to Conduct an Oral History Interview

Guidelines

# Guidelines

- Pre-Interview (**The Three P's**)
- Interview
- Post-Interview

# Pre-Interview Guidelines

## The Three P's:

What are they?

**P**reparation

**P**reparation

**P**reparation

# Pre-Interview Preparation

- Preparing the Narrator
- Preparing Yourself
- Preparing the Equipment

# Preparing the Narrator

- Inform them of the purpose of the interview and that it will be recorded.
- Inform them well in advance of the types of questions you will ask during the interview. The best method is to send them a list of questions and have them return to you their responses.
- Inform them that the interview will be made available to the public.
- Make sure they understand and are willing to sign an Interview Agreement.
- Ask if they have memorabilia (photos, letters, maps, etc...) to which they might want to refer during the interview (and/or donate to become a part of the oral history).
- If the narrator served in the military, ask if they have a copy of their DD214 or other official documentation (be tactful).

# Preparing Yourself

- Understand the experiences of the Narrator and prepare an informed set of questions based on pre-interview responses
- Choose your equipment
- Practice using your equipment
- Choose an interview location

# Understand the Experiences of the Narrator

- Have narrator answer questions *before* the interview.
- Review completed questionnaires *before* the interview.
- Research, Research, and more Research *before* the interview.

# Choose Your Equipment

- What will you use to record the interview?
  - Tape recorder (standard, micro, mini)
  - Minidisk Recorder
  - Video Recorder
- If you want to videotape the interview, be sure to ask the narrator first. Some people do not like or want to be videotaped.
- Make sure you have everything you need - make a list.

# Equipment Guidelines

- Use external microphones if possible.
- Estimate how long the interview will last and take enough tapes/disks to go twice as long as you estimate.
- Use tapes with a duration of 90 minutes or *less*.
- Take enough batteries to go twice as long as you estimate.
- Take an extension cord and plug adapters.
- Use an equipment checklist before you leave for the interview to ensure you have everything.

# Sample Equipment Checklist

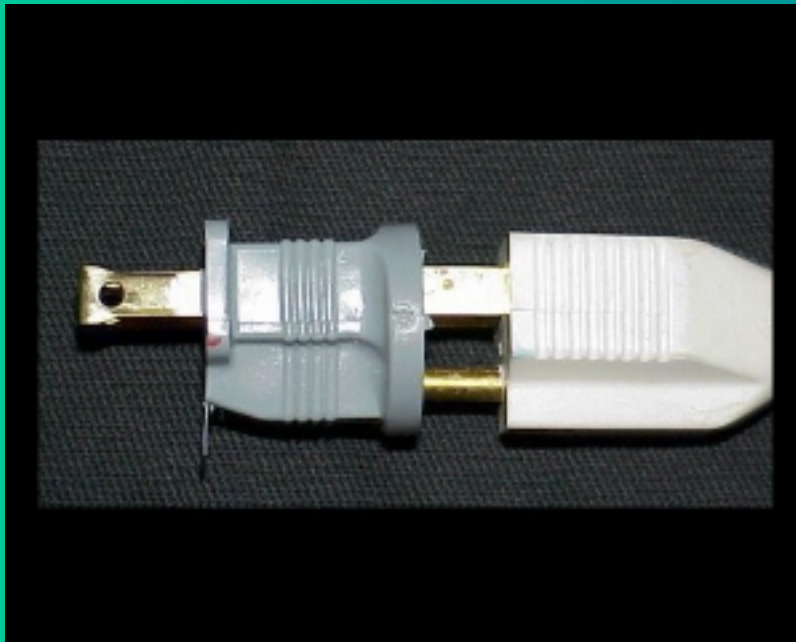
- Recording Equipment
  - Tape/Minidisk/Video Recorder
  - Power Cords and Extension Cord
  - Adapter Plugs
  - External Microphone(s)
  - Blank Tapes/Disks
  - Extra Batteries
- Miscellaneous Items
  - Pens
  - Paper
  - Questionnaires
  - Interview Agreement

# Special Equipment

Adapters

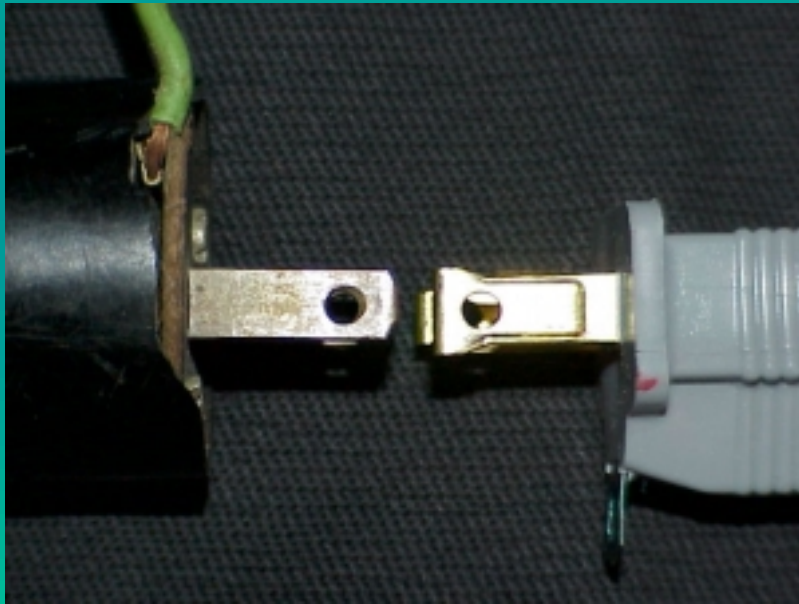
# Cord Adapters

In the event you go to someone's home to conduct the interview, be prepared.



- Standard 3 to 2 prong adapter

# Cord Adapters



- Right: Modern adapter with flared post for grounding.
- Left: Older adapter with narrow posts.

# Practice Using Your Equipment

- Rehearse
  - Be sure you rehearse using all of the equipment you plan to use during the interview.
- Assemble
  - Connect all of your equipment together to make sure it works and records properly.
- Check Recording
  - Conduct a recording check a day or so before the interview and again just before you start to record the interview.

# Choose an Interview Location

- Consult with Narrator
- Choose Wisely
  - Private *not* Public
  - Minimize Distractions
  - Minimize Background Noise
  - Comfortable

# Conducting the Interview

# Conducting the Interview

- Check list
- Set up Equipment
- Test Equipment
- Establish rapport
- Explain interview procedures
- Sign Interview Agreement

# Recording the Interview

- Introduction
- Begin the Interview
- Ask the Right Questions the Right Way
- Be a Good Listener and remain flexible
- Take Notes and Ask Clarifying Questions
- Be Sympathetic to the Needs of the Narrator

# Introduction

- Name of the Interviewer (This is...)
- Name of the Narrator (...interviewing...)
- Location of the Interview (...at...)
- Date and Time of the Interview (...on...)
- Purpose for the Interview (...as part of the FAC Book Project.)

# The Interview

After the introduction, begin by asking the narrator for basic biographical information. This should include information like their full name, date and place of birth, where they grew up, where they graduated from high school, and their reasons for entering military service.

# Asking Questions

- Ask prepared questions
- Take notes and ask clarifying questions
- Be a good listener and remain flexible
- Allow for silent pauses
- Try not to interrupt the narrator

# Guidelines for Asking Questions

- Keep your questions simple and brief.
- Ask your questions in chronological order.
- Don't ask dead-end questions that result in simple “yes” or “no” responses.

# Be a Good Listener

- Remember, your list of questions should merely serve as a *guide* for the interview.
- Remain flexible and do not get upset if the narrator begins to discuss matters off the immediate subject of a question.
- If the narrator needs to be brought back on subject, ask a leading question.
- Be patient. Do not get upset if the narrator pauses silently for a few moments. They are trying to recall events that occurred 25-35 years ago.

# Take Notes and Ask Clarifying Questions

If you want the narrator to provide more information on something they mention, don't interrupt them. Take notes and let them finish talking. Then you can ask them to clarify.

# Take Notes and Ask Questions

- When you don't understand something the narrator says, write it down and ask at the next pause in the interview.
- If you don't recognize the word or expression as English, spell it out phonetically (guess) and try to pronounce it the same way as the narrator when you ask what it means.

# Be Sympathetic to the Needs of the Narrator

- Be prepared to pause for basic breaks
  - drink
  - restroom
  - etc...

# And Remember...

You might be asking a Veteran to discuss events that have profound emotional effects upon them. Some narrators may have witnessed some of their closest friends seriously wounded or killed or they might have bore witness to other gruesome and horrible events of war. Pay attention! If the narrator needs a moment to regain composure, be tactful and sympathetic to those needs. Pause the recording devices until such time as the narrator is comfortable with continuing the interview.

# Ending the Interview

- End the interview at a logical stopping point.
- Ask if the narrator has any last comments to make.
- Say “Thank You.”

# Post-Interview

- Label all tapes and disks
- Ask to make copies of documents and other memorabilia brought to the interview by the narrator.
- Make backup copy of tapes and disks

# Transcribe

- The transcript is a textual copy of the interview that will substitute for listening to tapes or watching video. Be sure you provide as accurate a verbatim transcript as possible.

# Proof and Final Draft

- Proof read the transcript while listening to the audio tapes.
- Send narrator a copy of your proofread draft so they can proofread also.
- Integrate appropriate changes recommended by narrator and create final draft.
- Send narrator copies of final draft transcript and audio tapes and a note of thanks.

# Summation

- What is Oral History
- Why Oral History
- Guidelines for Interviewing
- Preparation
- Equipment
- Rules for Asking Questions
- Rules for Interviewing

Thank You!