

WIA - ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Notes on collecting Oral History

OVERVIEW

- Collecting Oral History is another form of documenting the past.
- Often individuals are reluctant or unable to document their involvement in the past and sometimes they don't realise that their story is important to us and society. This is where you can help!
- Modern electronic recording devices, tape, digital and video, allow us to preserve history in the individual's own words and in a manner superior to just passing on, perhaps through generations, important verbal histories.
- As amateurs, most of us understand the technologies of modern recording techniques, so provided we brush up on the requirements of gathering oral history, we should be in a good position to faithfully preserve our past.
- We are lucky that some preservation work was commenced many years ago by earlier amateurs; however it is now our responsibility to build on their work.

PLANNING THE INTERVIEW

Make contact with the interviewee

Once you have an understanding of the task at hand, make contact with the person, perhaps by means of a phone conversation to:

- Outline the importance of the subject to be covered. (Sometimes it is better to use the term "research" instead of "oral history".)
- Ask if the person is prepared to be interviewed about the proposed subject.
- Make sure there is no objection to recording the interview otherwise, if the subject matter is important, you may have to rely on taking notes instead.

Understand the interviewee

- Try to gather background information about the person you are about to interview, not only regarding the subject matter you are seeking, but also about the person's life and interests.
- This could become invaluable during the interview when "side comments" are made.
- It also indicates to the interviewee that you have gone to some trouble to research the subject and also provides an indication of your respect for the interviewee.
(Be careful not to over do this and become a "know all"!)

Design the Task

- Think about just what you are trying to achieve by the interview.
- Make notes of the important issues you would like the interviewee to address.
- It is often advantageous to provide a list of topics (but best not to provide the actual questions) you intend to cover in the interview.
- If photographs or diagrams of the subject matter are available, use them to prompt the memory during the interview.

- For various reasons, some people will only be prepared to be interviewed if they have advanced notice of the questions to be asked. While not ideal, in the interests of obtaining information, questions may be provided on paper. Often it is possible to drift from the “pro forma” questions once the interviewee relaxes and becomes prepared to follow your lead. This situation can only be assessed by the interviewer and it may be necessary to “stick to the script”!

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

- Before the actual interview commences, putting your interviewee at ease is most important. Often this can be achieved by talking about some other common interest, mutual friends, activities in the district, the weather, etc.
- During this time, it may be appropriate to switch on the recorder to “ensure that the recording levels are set and then leave the recorder running while saying “perhaps we could start” or just slip in your first question.
- You may have a number of “false starts”, but it is best to leave the recorder running and state that you will edit the false starts out later. The aim of this approach is to attempt to take attention away from the recorder and the recording process.
- Try to keep the recording process “low key” to help minimise nerves on the part of the interviewee. This extends to the physical aspects of recording.
- Try to use a microphone set up in the one position instead of holding the microphone near the person’s mouth and drawing attention to it.
- If the recording can be made in an environment which is quiet and suffers little echo, a flat, pressure zone microphone (PZM) located on a table between the interviewee and interviewer should give excellent results.

IN SUMMARY

- The person you are about to interview is doing you a favour. Information which previously has been only partly understood or known about, may be now given a different aspect and indeed a range of new information may be forth-coming.
- The interviewee may be reluctant and nervous about “talking into a recorder” – it is your job to minimise this perceived difficulty and make the process as easy as possible for all concerned.
- Ideally, the interview should later be transcribed to paper. This is a laborious task but the printed word will be reviewed in the future by far more people than a recording. Cross referencing and indexing is essential, especially in the case of a long interview.
- A brief, typed summary of the interview should be included with the recording so that some idea of the topics discussed are easily obtained. Limited information such as “the recording is of Mr Smith talking about his early days in Melbourne” is not very helpful!
- At the present, the WIA Archive prefers CD version of the interview rather than tape or digital (mp3 or wav) formats.

Further general information about oral history can be found in the *Oral History Handbook* by Beth M Robertson published by the Oral History Association of Australia (South Australian Branch) Inc. ISBN 0 9591400 8 5