

Oral History: What It Is & How To Do It

By Bruce M. Stave

Upon receiving the National Book Award Medal in 1997 the popular oral historian Studs Terkel asked, “When the Chinese Wall was built where did the masons go for lunch? When Caesar conquered Gall, was there not even a cook in the army?... when the Armada sank, you read that King Philip wept. Were there no other tears?”

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Terkel, who died last year at age 96, continued, “And that’s what I believe oral history is about. It is about those who shed those other tears, who on rare occasions of triumph laugh that other laugh.” Oral history is about all of us—the famous and the unfamous, those of us who lead ordinary lives as well as those of us who live extraordinary lives. It is a way for generations to speak to each other, for communities to learn about their history, and for families to explore their heritage.

When the tradition of oral history in its modern sense—that is, in the form of planned, recorded interviews—emerged 60 years ago, it emphasized the history of the powerful, rich, and famous. The first modern oral historians, in keeping with the way history was practiced at the time, viewed history from the top down. As the approach to history shifted toward emphasis on everyday life, recorded interviews proved the perfect tool. How better to find out about the lives of those who weren’t written about in newspapers, who rarely kept diaries, and who haven’t kept files of correspondence, than to ask them to talk about their experiences? The process grew easier as recording equipment became less expensive and complicated to use. The transition from heavy reel-to-reel recorders to convenient cassettes and then to light-weight digital equipment has facilitated oral history interviewing.

The use of the recorder distinguished oral history from oral tradition, which dates to ancient times. Passing stories from generation to generation was nothing new. But recording first-hand experience and preserving those recordings in archives at universities, museums, historical societies, or libraries was new, as is the more recent effort to develop oral history-based Web sites.

Some Connecticut Oral History Collections

In Connecticut, oral history is alive and well, and interest in it is growing as it becomes more accessible to a public increasingly receptive to its benefits. The University of Connecticut established an Oral History Project in 1968. Although its name changed to the Center for Oral History and, more recently, to the Oral History Office (OHO), its purpose has remained consistent. Not only has it captured UConn’s own history, it has undertaken a variety of studies such as “The Peoples of Connecticut” project, which includes interviews with members of many of the state’s European ethnic groups and with African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Other subjects in its diverse collection of many hundred oral histories include studies of the state’s workers and technological change, women quilters, Holocaust survivors, art associations, female political activists, tobacco workers, and American participants at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials. Interview transcripts are available at the university’s Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, and more about the OHO can be found on its Web site; its most recent catalogue can be found on the Dodd Center’s Archives and Special Collections Web site. (See page 43 for a list of oral history Web sites.)

The Greenwich Library Oral History Project, a useful model for local history, began in 1973. Since that time it has collected more than 800 interviews about that community’s history. Most of the interviews have been transcribed and indexed and can be read at the library, as can more than 130 pamphlets, booklets, and books based on the collection.

The early 1970s also witnessed the beginnings of another major oral history project in Connecticut. At Yale University,

Marge Schneider (interviewed November 12, 1997): “...If they were really on a dangerous job and had long hair, I would have to apologize and say, ‘I’m sorry, but for your own sake, you’ve got to put a cap on. It’s easier than losing your whole scalp.’ And they would. It was harder on the shoes because nobody wanted to wear the shoes. But if they were on a job, all it took was one person to be injured, and then everybody would wear it. The women had to wear the coveralls that I had on.”

Marge Schneider, a safety inspector at the Bridgeport Brass during World War II, counseled female factory workers on work-appropriate clothing.

Bridgeport Public Library Historical Collections



Oral History of American Music (OHAM) had its origins with the success of the Charles Ives oral history project [for more on OHAM and a related article see “Charles Ives, Connecticut’s Compelling, Confounding Composer,” Fall 2008]. Subsequently, other composers told their stories to Vivian Perlis and her assistants. They’ve added about 1,800 audio and visual recordings to the OHAM collection.

At the end of the 1970s, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony

began when Laurel Vlock, a television specialist, and Dori Laub, a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, wanted to test whether video could be employed effectively to document the memories of Holocaust survivors. The initial 200 videotapes were deposited at Yale in 1981. The next year the university’s Sterling Memorial Library formally established the Video Archive, which five years later was endowed by Alan M. Fortunoff. It has become a major source for Holocaust studies.

Hartford’s West Indian community was the subject of an oral history project conducted by the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS) in conjunction with the city’s West Indian Social Club and West Indian Foundation, culminating in the exhibition “Finding a Place, Maintaining Ties” in 2003. Another recent CHS program employed oral history to study the city’s iconic department store, G. Fox, and its renowned owner, Beatrice Fox Auerbach.

Trinity College’s Hartford Studies Project has conducted student-generated oral histories with Latino workers about growing up during the Great Depression, and participating in Project Concern, a voluntary city-suburb school busing program in the 1960s and 1970s. The New Haven Oral History Project at Yale recorded interviews during the early years of this century about the city’s past and was developed with the intent of improving “town-gown” relations as it endeavored to demonstrate the elite university’s respect for ordinary New Haven residents who had valuable memories to share. Other projects have been conducted in larger cities such as Bridgeport and Waterbury and in smaller communities such as Windsor, South Windsor, and Farmington. Central Connecticut State University in New Britain is home to a digitally based Veterans History Project.

Amy Spirito (interviewed March 29, 2006): “Every spring, the young girls in town, aged around 10 to 12, would pick violets and make a little bunch to sell. The group of girls was called the Victory Girls Club of Farmington (VGC). Several girls at our school would get together to do community work and keep the town of Farmington clean. We would pick violets and make little bouquets and sell them to the girls at Miss Porter’s for about 25 cents. I remember Gloria Vanderbilt and Maude and Michelle Bouvier, Jackie’s aunts, buying them from me. Jackie’s aunts had flaming red hair. I remember it like it was yesterday.”

Field hockey team, c. 1944.
Farmington Library Oral History Project



An Oral History How-To

Wherever the location, whatever the topic, oral history is a process as well as a gathering of information. For young people, such as students who are assigned to participate in a project as an interviewer, it sometimes offers the first opportunity to seriously communicate with a family member or other adult about an important subject. Oral history is growing increasingly common in nursing homes as the young gather the stories of the old. It brings generations together, placing value on and giving meaning to the lives that are being remembered and may even have therapeutic value to the elders. Many teachers have employed oral history to enliven their classes and to make history an active

rather than a passive (and, unfortunately, sometimes dull) rote learning experience. Through oral history, students generate source material and learn communication skills, the importance of background research, and, if they are asked to transcribe an interview, writing and grammar skills. In such instances, the *process* can be as important as the information that is gathered.

While StoryCorps, heard over National Public Radio, has popularized the notion that oral history is a casual conversation between two people who know each other and speak with little or no preparation, StoryCorps is storytelling, not, strictly speaking, oral history. A true oral history project requires organization and preparation. Here are some tips to get you started:

1. Envision the Final Product:

First determine what the desired final product is to be. Are you amassing a collection of recordings and transcripts to make available to researchers? Will your oral history serve as the basis of a book, pamphlet, article, documentary, Web site, captions for a photo exhibit, or a source for a playwright, who will craft it into a theatrical production? Or is it for personal use, to help you compile a record of your own family, solely for family purposes? The versatility of oral history permits it to be used to all these ends; the key to success is to establish a good sense of purpose and focus and to then plan and organize for a project’s implementation.

2. Determine the Scope:

Next, determine the number of interviews you’ll need to conduct, as that will determine the resources needed to undertake a study and see it through to completion. Potential interviewees and interviewers should be identified, since all too often projects fail due to a shortage of interviewers or subjects.

Hollis Schneider (interviewed January 3, 2008): “I am a Hartford native and I have many wonderful memories of the city I grew up in during the 1940s and ‘50s. It was the golden age of Hollywood, and there were many beautiful theaters downtown. But the most exciting one for me was the State Theater on Village Street. It was a huge place with over 3,000 seats, built in 1926, and after a rather spotty career, it closed and then re-opened. But it was demolished in 1962 when they took over that land for, I think it was, the highway, 84, going through.... My friend and I would pack a brown-bag lunch nearly every Saturday, eating it surreptitiously because you weren’t supposed [chuckles] to do that, and sitting through all the movies and stage shows for most of the day. Then we went out to the stage door at the back of the theater, hoping for a glimpse or maybe an autograph of the stars.... and my heartthrob, Gordon McCrea, the wonderful baritone who starred in *Carousel* and *Oklahoma* and had a radio show also... I still have the autograph that he graciously gave me. After signing autographs, he walked—no limos—walked to the WTIC Studios in the Travelers Building for a radio interview. I was right behind him, even pulling a few threads from his woolen coat as a souvenir.”

State Theater being demolished, 1962.
Hartford History Center, Hartford Public Library



Plan to record just one person per interview. If you must interview several people at once, have each state his or her name at the beginning of the recording. Introduce the recording with the names of the interviewee and the interviewer, the project title, and the date and site of the interview. Include that information in writing on a corresponding disk or tape label.

3. Choose Your Equipment:

Invest in the best, easiest-to-use equipment that your budget can accommodate. Some oral historians favor the Marantz PMD 660 Portable Solid State Digital Recorder for audio recording. I also have had good luck with the very tiny, and less expensive, Olympus WS 100 Digital Voice Recorder that fits in your pocket; later models are available. Whatever equipment is used, interviewers must familiarize themselves with it so as not to waste precious time and opportunity during interviews.

4. Conduct Advance Research:

Thoroughly research the subject of the interview, developing a wealth of background information and ensuring that your interview will cover all relevant topics. Draft “question guidelines,” that is, either a list of topics to be covered or a list of open-ended questions. List as many topics or questions as possible, knowing that not every point will be covered in an interview and that no two interviews will be exactly alike.

5. Contact Interviewees:

Send potential interviewees a letter or e-mail briefly explaining the project and indicating that they will be called for an appointment for what is likely to be at most a two-hour session. (Two hours is considered an optimum time for an interview and affords enough time to accumulate a great deal of

information.) The letter also should mention that the subject will have an opportunity to review the material obtained from the interview and will be asked for written permission for its use. This letter ensures that the subject has an idea of what is in store for him or her and understands that the information gathered will not be used without permission.

6. Choose a Location:

Ideally, conduct the interview in a quiet place to avoid extraneous sounds such as street noises, air conditioners, ringing phones, or cuckoo clocks. Place the microphone closer to the interviewee than to the interviewer so that answers are clear on the recording. (I often find a dining room table a good place to set the microphone; avoid placing the recorder on a low cocktail table, which can muffle sound.)

7. Conduct the Interview:

Conduct the interview in an informal, conversational tone, and be flexible in your questioning. Don’t interrupt the interviewee unless he or she goes wildly astray; even then, gently bring your subject back on topic. Always remember that the best interviewer is the best *listener*.

8. Transcribe Your Recordings:

Once the interview is completed, transcribe it and store written word and sound on your computer; immediately print it out, if possible, onto acid-free paper, which is likely to last longer than any current computer technology. A minute of interview will yield approximately a half page of transcription. Transcribing is a complex process in and of itself, and not everyone does it well. It is very labor intensive, often taking five hours to transcribe one hour of recording. Ask a trustworthy volunteer to help or hire a

Carlos De León (interviewed 2004): “From the moment that I started crossing borders, everything was very difficult for me. I was confronting different worlds. I was finding out that it was not easy to cross a border. I was risking my life. I hear that a lot of people were dying, too, trying to cross the borders.”

Carlos De León, age 16. De León left Guatemala to avoid participating in the civil war there in the 1980s. When interviewed in 2004, he was in his 30s and living with his wife and three children in Naugatuck. Tragically, a few months after the interview, Carlos fell from a tree while working and died.

Urban Studies Program at the University of Connecticut/Waterbury Campus



professional transcribing service. Avoid voice-recognition computer programs for now; they are not yet sophisticated enough to provide quality transcription, though they soon may be up to the job. Once the interview is transcribed, proofread and make any necessary corrections before sending to the interviewee for review.

Eric Massari (interviewed November 3, 2001): “There were games we played during the Depression—Release, Kick the Can, Knives. There was “Peggy” where you had two bases with catchers, a pitcher, and a hitter. You hit the peg and ran back and forth as many times as possible without getting tagged. We used a paddle with clothespins, and you could go back and forth say five times before getting caught because you could hit those pegs quite far!”

Eric Massari and friends. Eric grew up in Waterbury's West Side Hill neighborhood.

The Mattatuck Museum Arts and History Center



9. Obtain Final Approval:

The interviewee has the right to make changes. Once he or she has reviewed the transcription and is satisfied, obtain a written agreement to assign the rights—including the right to post the recording on your Web site—to your institution. The oral historian has an ethical responsibility to inform the subject as to how his or her story will be made public.

Following these guidelines, oral historians have the opportunity to increasingly explore Connecticut's recent history. In so doing, we should be appreciative of, and use carefully, the vast source of memory that exists, always keeping in mind that oral history's prime value is that it permits us to

understand the past from the perspective of the present. With that understood and the limitations of memory recognized, we have a very powerful instrument to help shape the future narrative of Connecticut's history by connecting it to what has come before. ➤

Sarah Ragovin Brody (interviewed November 2008): “I had the serious ward through the whole war. What happened was after many, many months, they realized I shouldn't be working with such seriously wounded soldiers all of the time. I was to get a break and work with the less disabled. I found that even worse. Because here were these young boys, they were cured in a short time, and they had to go back to the front line. And they were crying because they didn't want to go back. I remember bringing my supper tray and giving it to them. I couldn't even eat. And I used to run back to get a bottle of whiskey that they would give out and I would bring it to them. I brought whatever clothes I had to them. I found it even worse to go back to them. It was much more difficult to take.”

Sarah Brody, WWII Army nurse at camp base in Germany. Brody served as a nurse lieutenant in General Patton's 3rd Army from 1942 to 1945.

Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford



Sources for the Images and Oral Histories Quoted in this Story:

“Bridgeport Working: Voices of the Twentieth Century,” Bridgeport Public Library Historical Collections. The online exhibition at www.bridgeporthistory.org features oral histories, photographs, and information about factories in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Bridgeport Public Library, Main Library, Burroughs Building, 925 Broad Street, Bridgeport. For more information call (203) 576-7403.

The Farmington Library Oral History Project's goal is to preserve the memories of long-time Farmington and Unionville residents. The oral histories are available to the public in the Farmington Room, Farmington Library, 6 Monteith Drive, Farmington. For more information call (860) 673-6791 or visit <http://www.farmingtonlibct.org/farmroom.htm>.

The Hartford History Center Oral History Project conducts interviews with members of the community who have helped to make or lived through and observed the history of Hartford. Electronic versions of the interviews are available in the Hartford History Center, Hartford Public Library, 500 Main Street, Hartford. For more information call (860) 695-6347 or visit www.hplct.org/hhc.

The “Jewish Women and World War II” oral history project shares the memories of Jewish women from the Hartford area who lived through the World War II period, both in the military and on the home front. Work is underway to make the interviews and scanned memorabilia available in the archive of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford, 333 Bloomfield Avenue, West Hartford, and

online at www.jhsg.org. It also will be available through the online archive of the Jewish Women's Archive at www.JWA.org. For more information call the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford at (860) 727-6171.

The Mattatuck Museum Arts & History Center uses oral histories to engage the community in an understanding of its past. Projects include the Ethnic Music Project, the Neighborhood History Project (www.brasscitylife.org; includes selected oral histories), the African-American History Project, the Jewish History Project (an online exhibition that includes selected oral histories), the Brass Valley Labor History Project, and the 20th Century Enterprise Project. The Mattatuck Museum Arts & History Center, 144 West Main Street, Waterbury. For more information call (203) 573-0381, ext. 10, or visit www.mattatuckmuseum.org.

Information on the University of Connecticut Oral History Office is available at www.oralhistory.uconn.edu, and a finding aid is available at www.lib.uconn.edu/online/research/specilib/ASC/findaids/COH/MSS19840025.html. An oral history collection of more than 100 interviews from post-World War II immigrants from more than 35 countries was generated under the auspices of the Urban and Community Studies Program at the University of Connecticut/Waterbury campus. Binders or electronic versions of the materials are available through the University of Connecticut Waterbury Campus Library, 99 East Main Street, Waterbury. For more information contact Ruth Glasser, Ph.D., coordinator and lecturer of Urban and Community Studies Program at University of Connecticut/Waterbury, at ruth.glasser@uconn.edu.

Selected Oral History Projects Available on the Web

Links also are available at www.hogriver.org.

University of Connecticut Oral History Office
www.oralhistory.uconn.edu

Thomas J. Dodd Research Center
doddcenter.uconn.edu/findaids/coh/mss/19840025.html

Connecticut Historical Society
www.chs.org/westindies/www.chs.org/fox/oralhistory.html

CCSU Veterans History Project
www.ccsu.edu/vhp

Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony
www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/about/history.html

Greenwich Library Oral History Project
www.glohistory.org/

Oral History of American Music
www.yale.edu/oham/about.html

Hartford Studies Oral History Project
www.trincoll.edu/UG/UE/HSP/Collection_OH.htm

New Haven Oral History Project
www.yale.edu/nhohp/about.html

Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century
www.bridgeporthistory.org

South Windsor Historical Society
www.museumstuff.com/rec/org2011.php

Windsor Historical Society
www.windsorhistoricalsociety.org