An Introduction to Oral History and Genealogy Projects
How many times have you heard someone say, “I wish I had made a recording of my grandmother while she was still living, to hear her voice and hear her describe our ancestry?” Oral history interviews and genealogy projects are a wonderful way to document family stories and create bonds around your shared history.

Here are some tips to help you get started.
When you research your genealogy, you are filling in your family tree. Primary sources, such as letters and documents, can provide important information. So can online records and databases.

**Conduct Primary Source Research**
Try starting your search in the following places:
- Courthouses
- State, national, and historical archives
- Public libraries
- Family History Centers, set up by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as genealogy resource centers
- Microfilm, microfiche, and online databases at libraries and archives

**Consult Online Resources**
Subscribe, or try your local library for access at no charge, to:
- Ancestry.com, to start building a family tree. Begin with known names; then find links to census and marriage records, death certificates, and other family trees.
- Online databases of county records, family papers and Bibles, maps, cemetery records, and archives.

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS**

Oral histories help you understand the experiences of your family members and can lead to discoveries about your family tree.

**Preparing for the Interview**
- Consider who might best tell the story of the family.
- Conduct research to learn what you can about the interviewee. Ask for information or look online.
- Sketch a basic family tree to guide the interview.
- Outline questions and prompts on note cards, which are quieter than paper and allow you to change the order.
- Give a list of questions to the interviewee ahead of time, if requested.
- Tell the person how you will use the interview, and obtain consent before beginning. Search online for sample oral history permission forms.

**Interview Techniques**
- Keep the focus on the interviewee.
- Be comfortable with periods of silence.
- Do not interrupt.
- Chronological questions are usually best.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Focus on listening. Follow up if needed.
- Let the interviewee decide how much or how little to share about disturbing experiences or uncomfortable topics. Reassure them that they may stop the interview at any time.
- Provide a comfortable setting to discuss sensitive topics and ease into difficult questions.

**Equipment You Will Need**
Record the interview to avoid missing anything that is said. Capturing the teller’s voice and expression also adds a great deal to the record.
- An audio or audio-visual recording device
- A tripod for videotaping, and lighting, if needed
- A lavalier microphone or handheld microphone
- A quiet location

**Suggested Topics for Oral Histories**
- Background (childhood, teenage years, adulthood)
- Parents and family
- Neighborhood and community
- Schools, school friends, favorite teachers, and extracurricular activities
- Work and employment
- Social life and relationships
- Children
- Religion, politics, and hobbies
- The effect of historical events on the interviewee

**Suggested Questions for Genealogy Interviews**
- How far back can you trace your family’s heritage?
- Do you know any dates of birth, death, or marriage for your ancestors?
- Where did your ancestors live?
- What did they do? How did they get there?
- Who in the family is connected to whom?
- Can you sketch a family tree?

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The Southern Oral History Program offers principles, tips, and tricks for conducting oral history interviews. Please visit sohp.org for more information.
To learn more about community-driven archives and the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries, visit library.unc.edu/wilson/shc.

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