

ORAL INTERVIEWING

This example is an incident in our own community history, showing the validity of oral interviews calling attention to an incident, yet requiring to be backed up with valid data to get the story correct.

Comparing a newspaper article with the oral histories and family lore does very often present a somewhat different story from the actual incident. There are a number of reasons for that, one being the story having been told and retold frequent times in conversations; more color gets added. Also in many oral histories the person more likely heard about the incident second hand rather than read about or witnessed it. The historian's job is to record history with as much fact as possible. What - when - where - who and perhaps why and how with valid reference to back it up as history instead of folklore.

Yet, it is not rare that there may be facts in folklore and oral histories and that when investigated and verified, become history.

The Virginia Enterprise 2-15-1907

WOOD ALCOHOL KILLS THREE

Gruesome Discovery by a Scaler in a Tie Camp Up the Rainy.

It was a gruesome sight which met the sight of the scaler as he opened the door of Bob Starr's tie camp on Monday morning and found the three occupants of the cabin cold in death from the effects of drinking wood alcohol.

The men were Robert Starr, George R. Burns and William Fitzgibbons, all of whom were known to many in the city, and the bodies of the men showed plainly that they had died in the most terrible agony, their limbs being drawn to their bodies, their fists clenched and

their faces distorted, their bodies after death having lain for several days and being frozen solid. Notice of the ghastly find was telephoned to this city and Undertaker Fleming went after the bodies. A table in the center of the room on which stood the three tin cups, in each of which was a spoon, bore mute testimony that the men had been indulging in toddy made of the poisonous fluid and had died simultaneously.

The body of Burns was yesterday shipped to his former home at Bradford, Ontario, Canada, for inturnment, while the remains of Starr were laid at rest in the Virginia cemetery this morning. The body of Fitzgibbons still lies at the Mesberg morgue, awaiting instructions for disposition. He is said to have a brother residing at Green Bay, Wis, and another in Canada, but efforts to communicate with them have thus far failed. Starr was a veteran of the civil war, and is reported to have much property, a farm in Canada being accredited among his holdings. He has run a tie camp near Houlton for two years past, the other two unfortunate men being in his employ, as teamster and cook. The last seen of any of the men alive was some ten days previously, when one of the number was in the city for supplies, and it is likely the trio had been dead several days before discovery.

1949 Oral History by Brittmount Club

42 years later, the following 2 stories related orally, the same story, but somewhat different accounts than the news account which was done at the time period of the incident

1. "There was Dead Man's Lake, so named because three men died there. They had been making the railroad ties for the company and had a cabin in which they lived. At Christmas time they wanted to celebrate so they went to the city to a drug store and asked for good alcohol. The druggist thought they said, "wood alcohol". A week later when the

company's checker came, he found them all dead".

2. "In 1909 nine Finnish loggers had a camp southwest of my place. In the spring they all went to Eveleth, drew out \$1,000 apiece for a trip back to Finland. After they obtained their money from the bank they bought wood alcohol by mistake and all died from drinking it. The money they had withdrawn was never found".

There surely was a valid story in the oral interviews, the facts varied in each story, but none the less, some men drank wood alcohol and died. With some hard data to validate it the tale becomes history.

Was the Newspaper correct? Let's look at the Archives of MN deaths in February 1907. There are 3 men that died in St. Louis County with similar names on the same date as each other. Keep in mind that no one should know the exact date of death as means to determine that had not been yet discovered. The person filing the death certificate could only write the current date on it. the following 3 men are listed on the date of 10 Feb 1907:

George F. Burns, Place of Birth, Canada,
Date of Birth, 1872 (35 years at death)

William Fitzgibbons, Place of Birth, Canada,
no DOB listed

Robert Starr was not listed in the records, but by using the recorded death date of the other two men it was found as follows:

Robert STAVES, Place of Birth, Canada,
Date of Birth 1855, Mother's maiden name,
CARROLL. (52 years at death)

Not yet proof of the name STARR being incorrect as the record is transcribed from written longhand to printed text and could be

in error also. This may require the actual death certificate for study.

Evidently the Reporter got his information from people that were acquainted with the men rather than the official sources.

FIRST TIME PREPARATION

Getting ready to interview the first several times took much more organization than I had anticipated, and I was nervous.

Sometimes I had not seriously considered exactly how I was going to retrieve and use the information which I obtained in the interviews.

In other words, would I want to transcribe each tape in its entirety, or only a portion of the tapes, or would the tape be used only as an oral history resource.

Sometimes I had not adequately anticipated who might want a copy of the interview.

If I felt the interview had a broader use than originally discussed, I want to help the interviewee understand and accept the change..

In another case, one set of interviews resulted in 11 hours of recording and I had to suggest alternatives to the original plan in order to accommodate the amount of material which I received.

Some of the things which help me prepare for an interview are:

1. Preparing a list of questions and topics ahead of time.

If you have time to do some research in the areas which you know may be discussed, it will help a lot to direct the questioning.

Avoid questions which will elicit only a yes or no answer!

2. Make sure the equipment works and that you know how to use it. A good

suggestion is 90 minute (or longer) Type I audio cassettes (be sure the tapes have screws in corners and can be taken apart easily if the tape breaks).

3. Have a supply of good tapes (more than I thought I could use), and having them all labeled, i.e. TAPE ONE, MASTER, DATE _____ NAME _____. Be careful and make a master copy of each tape immediately upon completion of the interview and before listening to them. You'll not get another opportunity for that interview.
4. Have a release form ready to be signed before beginning the interviews (issues here include copyright, who may use interview and how it may be used)..
5. Establish a quiet location for conducting the interview without interference from outside listeners and noise.(especially the spouse!)
6. Plan to enjoy the interviews, and the stories of the interviewee!

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How to Conduct and Utilize Oral Interviews

Oral history is the process of collecting an individual's spoken memories of his or her life, of the people he or she has known, and the events which he or she witnessed or participated in. Oral history is another primary source technique historians use to help them interpret the past. Oral histories can be used to supplement written records, complement secondary sources (what has been written by historical scholars), and to provide information that would exist in no other form.

But, using oral histories as a source can also pose problems. Interviewees are human. They

can forget things. Their memories can play tricks on them. You have to be very careful as a historian when you use oral history as a source.

Oral history (conducting interviews) is not a substitute for basic research. Historians should research printed and electronic resources for background information and historical accounts of the issue, event, or personality being studied.

Consider the following suggestions on how to how to conduct and utilize oral interviews.

Preparing:

Decide which individuals would be most appropriate to interview. There are many ways to find someone to interview. Ask your family members. Contact veterans and civic organizations, church groups, etc. Put a request in your local newspaper, newsletter, etc.

It's helpful when you find someone to have them complete a brief preliminary questionnaire to give you some background on them.

Schedule the interview as soon as possible and by telephone if possible. Confirm the meeting time and date a day before conducting the Interview.

Learn as much as possible about the topic of your interview before conducting it. Carefully read the person's completed questionnaire.

Make up a list of questions from things on the questionnaire.

Do enough preliminary research so that you are able to ask intelligent questions.

Prepare a brief outline of questions you will be asking.

Make sure you are familiar with your recorder. Make sure any equipment you will be using is working properly (camcorder, tape recorder, etc.) and secure the interviewee's

permission to record the interview. Practice to make sure you can operate. Have an extra tape in case the interview is longer, or in case the tape would break.

When selecting the location for the interview, ask the interviewee where he or she would be most comfortable. Choose a place that is quiet, where there won't be a lot of distractions.

Conducting the Interview:

Dress appropriately and create a good impression.

When you get to the interview, chat briefly with your interviewee to get him or her feeling relaxed and comfortable with you.

Explain, again, to the interviewee your purpose for the interview.

Do not begin the interview abruptly.

Introduce yourself, make the interviewee as comfortable as possible, and review the interview process you will be using.

Be sure to let them know how much you appreciate getting the chance to talk with them.

During the interview, keep things moving.

Express an interest in what the interviewee is saying and listen carefully.

Make a conscious effort to be unbiased and try not to influence how the interviewee will answer your questions. Have your questions ready, but do not rely totally on them.

By listening carefully to what the person is speaking about, you can come up with additional questions.

Avoid too many open-ended questions that require long complicated answers.

Use a tape recorder or camcorder to more accurately record the interview.

In addition, take notes and accurately record the correct spelling of name, places, etc.

Silence can be productive. Do not rush the narrator to respond.

You may need to have the interviewee sign a legal release form enabling you to use any information gained through the interview for research purposes.

Know the physical limitations of the person you are interviewing.

If the person has a hard time hearing, make sure you speak up loudly and clearly.

Don't let an interview drag on endlessly.

If you still have areas to cover, you might want to take a short break.

Have a good closing question that helps the interviewee summarize his/her statements and helps bring closure to the interview.

Be sensitive. Indicate to the interviewee that his/her answers will be reported anonymously if requested.

Some subjects may provoke an emotional response.

If a person starts to cry, you might turn off the tape recorder for a few minutes.

After the interview, send a thank you note to the person being interviewed within one week of the interview.

If you transcribe the tape, send your interviewee a copy, or if you don't transcribe the entire tape, send them the paper you wrote.

Examining:

Prepare a written summary, note cards, and/or outline of the key points discussed in the interview that are relevant to your topic.

What perspective did the interviewee give you about the topic?

What did the interviewee tell you about the lifestyles, culture, political atmosphere, economic issues, education, etc. of the time period being studied?

Is the interviewee a dependable source of information?

Did the interviewee have a difficult time remembering dates, places, and events?

Compare/Contrast the information given to you by the interviewee with the factual information you have learned from researching other primary and secondary sources.

Determine Its Usefulness:

What information from this interviewee is useful for the development of your topic?

What does this information contribute to the development or analysis of your topic?

How can incorrect information or biased viewpoints be used?

How can the information gained from your interview be most effectively used in your research project?

Oral history can be used to validate other data, to collect opinions reflecting different points of view, to acquire background or perspective, and to collect “up-to-date” data.

In summary, oral history can also demonstrate cause and effect, objectivity versus subjectivity, reality versus abstraction, fact versus opinion, and attitudes then and now.

Oral Interview Questions used for a Project

If you want to prepare an interview for Britt, these are some of the themes we are focusing on. We are interested in where people came from before they came to Britt. What their occupations and interests were. That is, just what they brought with them

So here are some questions. I’m sure you can think of others.

Your family:

When did your family first come to Britt?
Where did they live before that?
What did they do there?

Their life:

Where were you born?

What do you remember most about your first neighborhood?

Do you know the address?

Was that the only neighborhood you lived in?

What school did you go to?

What did your parents do?

What associations did they belong to?

Were they religious?

We are interested in:

What might have differed before and after the war.

If you went back to your old neighborhood, what would you miss the most?

What did the teenagers do for fun?

What were the songs you associate with life back then?

What was different about growing up in Britt?

I am sure you can write better questions.

Good Luck and looking forward to your contributions.

Write your interview up in Questions and Answers, so that the reader can see the interview as a chat conversation.