

## Recording Family Oral Histories.

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What do you really know about your grandparents or great grandparents? If you are lucky stories about them have been passed down over the years. Perhaps there is a connection to them in family heirlooms, old photos or old letters and diaries. Most likely you are limited to the sort of basic information one can find in genealogy charts. But what do you really know about your ancestors? Does that make you wonder what future generations will know about you and your family?

I will assume for this article that you do not have to be convinced that recording family oral histories is worthwhile. I have been making recordings of my family since the late sixties and have learned a thing or two. Twenty years ago or so I took some oral history training at the local historical society. I do such recordings for other people as part of my work. It is my pleasure now to share some tips and resources for recording your family oral histories.

### Equipment List.

1. Recorder.
2. Extra batteries and battery tester.
3. Power Extension cord.
4. External lapel microphone.
5. Extra tapes if applicable.
6. Writing materials.
7. Headphones for monitoring and listening back to your recording.
8. List of questions\*
9. Camera.

### Set Up And Location.

1. Test your equipment before you sit down to record to be sure everything is working properly.
2. Use an audio recorder that has a power cord if possible. Batteries can run down unexpectedly and result in missed material or improper recording speed.
3. Clip an external lapel microphone to your subject's clothes at the mid-chest level if your recorder can use one. Audiocassette recorders will record the sound of their motors if you don't use an external microphone.
4. Conduct the recording in a quiet place with no interruptions if possible. Plan to record anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour at a shot and then take a break if your subject seems tired.
5. Be prepared to fill out tape labels with date and subject as soon as you are finished recording. Punch out the erase tabs on top edge of the tape to prevent accidental erasure.

### Prepare Your Subject.

Before you do your first recording of a family member explain why you are doing the recordings and make sure it is OK with him/her. If it will help put them at ease, show them some of the questions and assure them that they are just suggestions. Paint a calm, relaxed picture for them of you listening with appreciation and respect. As they say on the StoryCorps website, "Listening is an act of love".

### How To Begin.

You have tested your equipment already. You are sitting comfortably with your subject in a quiet room. Clip the lapel mic to your subject with confidence. In a relaxed manner, start your recorder and state aloud the date, time, location, who you are and your subject's name. Try to sound casual but clear. If your subject seems nervous, just chat for a bit and then work up to your first question.

### Conducting The Interview.

Use a list of questions\* that you have selected. In general start with the earliest memories and work to the present. Ask open-ended questions such as, "What are your earliest memories" as opposed to, "Would you say you had a happy childhood?" Allow your subject to think and respond. Resist the temptation to finish a sentence or fill in the blanks. Ideally you should be perfectly quiet and just give your subject non-verbal

feedback such as nodding your head for encouragement and making good eye contact to show that you are listening carefully.

Aside from keeping quiet the most difficult thing to do is to wait out occasional silences. It is important that you let your subject think after he/she has seemingly finished talking because related comments or stories may follow after the fact. Respect their pauses and they will be more open and trusting.

You may use the recording as an opportunity to request specific information or a specific story that you want to preserve. As long as you are not asking a question that will bring up a painful memory or inhibit your subject from further sharing... ask away. You are doing the work, you can choose the questions.

You can go into a recording with questions that aim at a specific subject or period of time. You can aim to fill in gaps of your sense of family history; fill out a timeline of sorts. However, if you have limited time please consider this: In my opinion the stories that really tell us about someone are the stories of his/her passions, strong values, lessons learned, and successes. And don't forget things like favorite foods, jokes, movies, books, and trips taken.

You may notice that a member of your family tells the same story often at gatherings of friends or relatives. When you interview that person, ask why the story is important. Sometimes they may not know why on the surface, but you know there is a reason. The stories we readily share with others are reflections of how we think of ourselves. They are part of our identity.

As a final touch to your recording, take a photograph of the subject.

#### **Special Problems.**

If you are trying to interview someone who has difficulty thinking of stories to share be prepared to bring out artifacts from past years such as objects relating to a special interest or hobby, prized possessions, photographs, etc.

For a subject who feels he/she has already told you these stories before, invite a friend who has not heard the stories to join you in the interview. With a little coaching, the friend will be another good listener who will be ready to hear the family stories for the first time. You will often get stories that you have not heard in a long time or never heard before! There is something about getting into the flow of telling someone new about your life that can bring up all kinds of connected memories.

#### **Venues Other Than Interviews.**

YOU can be your own subject! You can record **your own life history**. Over the years I have kept an **audio journal** which is a viable type of oral history recording. I have also turned on a recorder during **family gatherings** to catch the exchange of stories and comments. Our family sent **audiocassette letters** back and forth to Dave Oguss when he was stationed in Vietnam. These moments are little time capsules.

#### **Afterward.**

Once you have recorded onto a tape you should make sure it is labeled and fixed to prevent erasure. Listen to the recording when you have time to make notes in the form of an outline.

Audiocassettes\*\* typically have a shelf life of 15 years or so. After that they are apt to lose information or become completely unplayable. If you are using audiocassettes you may want to consider transferring the recording to an audio CD or directly onto your computer. If you are not sure how to do that and would rather not get involved in the technology there are businesses that will do it for a fee. *Third Floor Recordings* can do it for you. If you are interested send an e-mail to [tvoa@aol.com](mailto:tvoa@aol.com)

Digital recordings will be much easier to share with other family members and pass on to future generations. Today you can show your love of your family by carefully listening and asking questions. Tomorrow your descendants will know much more about the members of your family than a few lines on a genealogy chart.

Ken Oguss

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*Third Floor Recordings*

Indianapolis Indiana

[tvoa@aol.com](mailto:tvoa@aol.com)

## WHAT KIND OF RECORDER?

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- **\*Portable Audio Cassette Recorders** – You may already have one that uses standard or micro audiocassettes. Use it with a power cord and lapel mic if you are already comfortable with it and don't want to fuss with the expense of buying and learning a new type of recorder. Recording quality varies but all will have "tape hiss". This technology is on the way out. Cost: Between \$20 - \$50.
  - [http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_ss\\_gw?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=audio+cassette+recorder&x=0&y=0](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_gw?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=audio+cassette+recorder&x=0&y=0)
- **Digital Voice Recorders** - Use flash memory cards that plug into your computer or use a USB cable.
  - Low End (cheaper) - These are often used for taking notes or recording classes. They are often very small, the audio quality is not great, but they are better than nothing. Olympus and Sony make a number of different recorders. Cost: Under \$100.
  - High End - Tascam and Edirol make high quality recorders. I highly recommend the **Zoom H2**; a very popular, easy to use digital recorder that is sensitive enough to use without a lapel mic. (BTW, great for recording live music!) Cost: \$150 - \$300.
    - [http://www.amazon.com/Zoom-H2-Portable-Stereo-Recorder/dp/B000VBH21G/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_sr\\_5?ie=UTF8&s=musical-instruments&qid=1220585339&sr=8-5](http://www.amazon.com/Zoom-H2-Portable-Stereo-Recorder/dp/B000VBH21G/ref=pd_bbs_sr_5?ie=UTF8&s=musical-instruments&qid=1220585339&sr=8-5)
    - [http://www.amazon.com/s/qid=1220585324/ref=sr\\_pg\\_1?ie=UTF8&rs=&keywords=digital%20recorder&rh=i%3Aaps%2Ck%3Adigital%20recorder&page=1](http://www.amazon.com/s/qid=1220585324/ref=sr_pg_1?ie=UTF8&rs=&keywords=digital%20recorder&rh=i%3Aaps%2Ck%3Adigital%20recorder&page=1)
- **Mini Disk Recorders** – Used to be standard equipment for groups like StoryCorps but are quickly being replaced by the flash memory types above. High quality. Sony dominates the market. Cost: \$150 - \$300.
  - [http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_ss\\_gw?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=mini+disk&x=0&y=0](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_gw?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=mini+disk&x=0&y=0)

## \*\*SOURCES FOR ORAL HISTORY QUESTIONS:

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**The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide.**

<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/interviewingguide.pdf>

**StoryCorps Great Questions List.**

<http://www.storycorps.net/record-your-story/question-generator/list>

**Suggested topics and questions for oral histories.**

<http://www.genealogy.com/00000030.html?Welcome=1007668300>

## OTHER ORAL HISTORY RESOURCES

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**Any Family Can Make History**

By Ellen J. Miller | NEWSWEEK

From the magazine issue dated Dec 23, 1991

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/124006/page/1>

**Sites to See: Compiling Oral Histories**

Learn how to take on an oral history project.

<http://www.aarpmagazine.org/family/Articles/a2003-01-21-oralhistorysites.html>

**StoryCorps**

an independent nonprofit project whose mission is to honor and celebrate one another's lives through listening.

<http://www.storycorps.net/>

**Tell It Like It Was**

By Studs Terkel - Interviewed by Jonathan Eig

A Pulitzer-winning journalist's tips for preserving your family story

<http://www.aarpmagazine.org/family/a2003-01-21-oralhistory.html>