

Preserving the Past with Oral History

Learning from local and statewide historic places

Amy Bennett



An eighth-grader conducts an oral history interview.

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TEACHING THE ORAL HISTORY LESSON

GRADE LEVELS

3-12

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Can oral history interviews teach us about local history?

ARKANSAS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS

(Updated Summer 2011)

Social Studies, Grades 3-8

(Many framework connections not listed below can be utilized in this lesson depending on the interview topic and questions. These include, but are not limited to the following examples: elements of culture, human settlement, types of transportation and communication, changes in technology, human influence on the environment, historic events, economic choices, resources, and goods and services)

H.6.4.12 Students will analyze changes in Arkansas from past to present.

Arkansas History, Grades 7-8

WWP.9.AH.7-8.2 Students will describe the social and economic effects of World War II on Arkansans.

WWP.9.AH.7-8.4 Students will examine the civil rights movement in Arkansas using primary and secondary sources.

WWP.9.AH.7-8.6 Students will examine the economic development of Arkansas after World War II.

American History, Grades 9-12

CUS.19.AH.8 Students will examine the cultural and technological changes in American society that began in the 1950s using primary and secondary sources.

Arkansas History, Grades 9-12

WWP.9.AH.9-12.2 Students will investigate the social and economic effects of World War II on Arkansans.

WWP.9.AH.9-12.4 Students will analyze the civil rights movement in Arkansas using primary and secondary sources.

WWP.9.AH.9-12.7 Students will analyze the economic development of Arkansas after World War II.

English Language Arts, Grades 3-4

IR.12.3.1 Students will generate questions about important and interesting topics.

IR.12.3.7 Students will organize information to draw a conclusion.

IR.12.4.1 Students will formulate questions about a specific topic.

IR.12.4.6 Students will make generalizations and draw conclusions based on the research of the topic.

English Language Arts, Grades 5-8

IR.12.5.1 Students will generate questions to select a specific topic for research.

IR.12.5.4 Students will gather information from a source appropriate to purpose and topic.

IR.12.5.8 Students will use research to create an oral, written, or visual presentation /product.

IR.12.6.1 Students will generate questions to explore and select a specific topic for research.

IR.12.6.4 Students will gather information from more than one source appropriate to purpose and topic.

IR.12.6.8.8 Students will use research to create one or more oral, written, or visual presentations /products.

IR.12.7.1 Students will formulate original questions to select a topic for research.

IR.12.7.5 Students will evaluate sources to select those most reliable and appropriate to purpose and topic.

IR.12.8.1 Students will formulate original questions to explain and select a topic for research.

IR.12.8.5 Students will self-select credible sources appropriate to purpose and topic.

English Language Arts, Grades 9-12

IR.12.9.1 Students will generate open-ended questions to select a topic.

IR.12.9.2 Students will establish a focus for research, and design a research plan to answer a specific question.

IR.12.9.7 Students will distinguish between primary and secondary sources.

IR.12.10.1 Students will generate open-ended questions to explore and select a topic.

IR.12.10.2 Students will establish a focus for research, and design a research plan to answer a set of questions.

IR.12.11-12.1 Students will formulate original, open-ended questions to explore, narrow, and select a topic.

IR.12.11.2 Students will establish a focus for research, and design a research plan to answer a specific question or defend a position.

IR.12.12.2 Students will establish a focus for research, and design a research plan to defend a position or prove/disprove a hypothesis.

LESSON OBJECTIVE

Students will research local history by conducting oral history interviews and organize their thoughts and conclusions into a project or paper.

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

Copies of Conducting an Oral History Interview, Technical Matters, Transcribing, and Example Questions for your students.

Oral history projects can be completed with pen and paper. However, you can choose to use audio/visual equipment, such as tape recorders and video cameras, to record oral history.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

1. Choose a project listed in *Oral History Project Ideas*, or create your own oral history project.
2. Create a list of questions and topics students will discuss with the interviewees, or ask students to comprise their own list of open-ended questions.
3. Decide if students will record the history on paper or with video/audio equipment.
4. Decide if using legal release forms with interviewees is appropriate for your project (see page 9).
5. After students complete their interviews, follow up with class discussion. Instruct students to compile their research into a paper or project.
6. If recording interviews, catalog and store the tapes/CDs/DVDs in a safe place.

ENRICHMENT/DIFFERENTIATION

1. Encourage students to research other primary and secondary sources to include in their research about the oral history interview topic.
2. Create walking tours with podcasts about historic places in your community using the oral history interviews.

RESOURCES

Websites:

Oral History Association
Dickinson College
PO Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013
www.dickinson.edu.oha

American Association for State and Local History
1717 Church Street
Nashville, TN 37203-2991
www.aaslh.org

American Folklife Center
Library of Congress
101 Independence Ave., SE
Washington, DC 20540
lcweb.loc.gov/folklife/

American Folklore Society
4350 N. Fairfax Drive
Suite 640
Arlington, VA 22203
www.afsnet.org

Books:

There are thousands of books of collected oral history on topics such as wars, women's lives, sports, immigration and Ellis Island, segregation, events such as Woodstock, etc. If there is a particular oral history topic you want to explore, check your local library for books. Most Arkansas libraries can do interlibrary loan from the Central Arkansas Library System. You can search their catalog at www.cals.lib.ar.us. A keyword search on "oral history" brings up over 100 titles.

Guides on Collecting Oral History:

Oral History: A Guide for Teachers (And Others)
Thad Sitton, George Mehaffy, and O.L. Davis
(Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1983)

Oral History: An Introduction for Students
James Hoopes (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill, 1979)

Oral History of Former Slaves:

Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember: An Oral History
James Mellon (New York: Avon Books, 1990)

This book should be available through your local library. It includes twenty-nine oral histories, selected from 2000 interviews with former slaves conducted in the 1930s for a WPA Federal Writers Project.

www.newdeal.feri.org
Go to the section, *Been Here so Long: Selections from the WPA American Slave Narratives*, to read fascinating interviews with three Arkansans who were slaves: Matilda Hatchett, Henry Turner and Scott Bond.

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/wpahome.html>
American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology. This website contains the text of 1930s WPA interviews with 13 former slaves

World War II Oral History:

www.tankbooks.com
"Where the greatest generation meets the latest generation." This extensive website contains oral history interviews, photos and stories from WWII.

<http://history.rutgers.edu/>
Click on *Affiliated Centers*, then *Oral History Archives*. This website catalogs 218 interviews with WWII soldiers.

Oral History of the Great Depression:

Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression
Studs Terkel (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986)

This book should be available through your local library. First published in 1970, this classic of oral history features the voices of men and women who lived through the Great Depression of the 1930s.

For the Teacher: What is Oral History, and Why is it Important? ¹

We all have stories to tell. Stories about the exciting and tragic and emotional things we have lived through. Oral history listens to these stories. Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own lives. Historians have finally realized that the everyday memories of everyday people, not just the rich and famous, have vast historical importance. Rich in personal triumph and tragedy, oral history is the history of the common person.

The historical products of oral history can be powerful and can reshape our views of the American past. In 1969, historian Theodore Rosengarten investigated an organization called the Alabama Sharecropper's Union. He recorded the stories of Nate Shaw, an illiterate African-American sharecropper. Shaw had been a principal actor in a confrontation between union members and the sheriff in 1932, for which Shaw spent 12 years in prison. Although he couldn't read or write, Shaw proved to be an extraordinary historical informant about the Alabama Sharecropper's Union. Shaw's story was published as a book, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*. A review of the book states:

Nate Shaw strides directly off the page and into our consciousness, a living presence, talking, shouting, sorrowing, laughing, exulting, speaking poetry, speaking history. We come to know Nate Shaw the farmer, hunter, log cutter, lumber hauler, swamp drainer, house builder, mule trainer, bee keeper, hog raiser, blacksmith, maker of axe handles, basket weaver. Nate Shaw is a primary source...a black Homer, bursting with his black Odyssey.

Nate Shaw's story defies conventional scholarly interpretation of the downtrodden tenant farmer. Likewise, careful reconsideration of the Federal Writer's Project slave narratives (see *Resources*), recorded in the 1930s, is changing our views about the institution of slavery.

Classroom oral history bridges the gap between curriculum and community. It brings history "home" by linking the world of the textbook to the student's family and community.

Unfortunately, many students get the idea that history is boring--something that happened far away, a long time ago, to distant people. Students should learn that history is all around them. John's uncle, who served in Vietnam, participated in an important historical event. The stories of Tasha's

¹ This section is paraphrased from the book: *Oral History: A Guide for Teachers (And Others)* Thad Sitton, George Mehaffy, and O.L. Davis (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1983) 1-23.

grandmother, who planted a victory garden and rationed food during WWII, teach us about what it was like to be a citizen on the homefront during that war. Sara's father watched his community's downtown deteriorate between the 1960s and 1990s. His stories can teach us not only about that community's growth and change, but also about larger issues of urbanization and rural development.

Classroom oral history involves students in research within their own family and community, helping them to identify with their heritage.

History in the classroom sometimes fails to give students a feeling of self-identity. However, oral history projects give the student the opportunity to explore their immediate and personal past. It gives them the opportunity to answer questions such as, "Who am I?" and "Where did I come from?" Historical exploration of family and ethnic heritage often brings a heightened sense of self-worth. Learning about the difficulties their ancestors overcame can give students a sense of pride at being part of that heritage.

Classroom oral history projects create something of real value to families, the school and the community.

In the book *Oral History, A Guide for Teachers (and Others)*, the authors write: ²

...years ago a younger brother of one of the authors conducted a two-hour taped interview with his maternal grandfather. This was a classroom project in seventh grade state history...The grandfather told of growing up in absolute poverty in backwoods east Texas...of attending pharmacy school on Galveston Island, of starting his own pharmacy in a small town, and of being wiped out by the Depression. His life story was interspersed with folklore—jokes, country aphorisms...and a folk ballad about the tragic death of Jessie James (which he sang).

None of the rest of the family paid much attention to the interview at the time it was conducted, but in recent years, after the grandfather's death, they turned the ancestral homeplace upside down looking for the tape. The family would give a great deal for it. The brother and his grandfather had created a unique primary source from a part of the family history that was only present in the living memory of the grandfather. Now the tape and that memory that created it are both gone, and gone absolutely.

² *Oral History: A Guide for Teachers (And Others)* Thad Sitton, George Mehaffy, and O.L. Davis (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1983) 21.

Oral History Project Ideas ³

Following are some examples of oral history projects you could do with your class. Be creative! You can take these ideas and modify them for your classroom, or use them as a springboard for creating your own oral history project.

MEMORY BOOK: A memory book project is easy and appropriate for younger students. In class, create a list of questions the students will ask one or both of their grandparents. The teacher can create a handout of the questions, with space for students to write in the answers. Students then interview their grandparent(s), writing in their answers. Students can decorate their memory books with photographs and other mementos.

FAMILY HISTORY: Students collect oral history from parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles. Students can use audio/video equipment and then transcribe the answers, or simply write down the answers to questions. They can mail questions to family members who live far away. After collecting the oral history, students can collect family photos and make a book about their family history. The classroom can even host an open house for family members to come and view the books. These family history books will surely become treasured possessions.

COMMUNITY HISTORY: Students interview senior citizens about community history topics, such as religious life, family life, leisure time, houses and neighborhoods, schools, national and local events, and community leaders. Several senior citizens can be invited to the school and interviewed by small groups of students. Each group of students can be responsible for covering one topic, such as *Pine Bluff's Historic Schools*. Finally, students can put their findings together to produce a booklet about the history of their community. The booklet can be presented to the local library or historical society.

LIVING HISTORY: CLASSROOM INTERVIEWS: Students locate community residents with unique life experiences, special skills or other valuable knowledge about the community. For example, the class might want to interview a former sharecropper or farmer, someone who participated in a historic community event, a former mayor, or the doctor who provided medical care to the community for 50 years. Let the guest speaker speak on his/her own for awhile, then students can ask questions of the speaker. This is a good way to gather first-hand information on a particular historical subject.

HISTORY OF SCHOOL/CHURCH: If you teach in a historic school, your students can write a history of the school. Students can read old school newspapers and interview former students, teachers, administrators, secretaries and custodians. The finished history can take a variety of forms: a chronological account of the school's major developments (additions to the building, sporting victories), a social history of the school (fashion, student fads and pastimes, clubs), or a series of oral history interviews. You can follow this same procedure with a historic church.

HISTORY OF LOCAL BUILDINGS: Choose an interesting local historic property, such as an old home, government building or commercial building. Students interview former owners/residents to answer a series of questions about it. For example, When was it built? Who has lived/worked there? What modifications have been made? Does the property have any folklore associated with it (such as a ghost story)? What does the future hold for this building? Is it in danger of being abandoned or deteriorating? Students could also research the history of the building through community records (see the AHPP lesson plan, *Be a Building Detective* for research sources). Students can work on a building individually or in small teams.

³ This main reference for this section was: *Oral History: A Guide for Teachers (And Others)* Thad Sitton, George Mehaffy, and O.L. Davis (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1983) 24-60.

FAMILY COOKBOOK and SOCIAL HISTORY: Traditional recipes can be a significant source of family lore and history. Family recipes are passed down from generation to generation, along with the stories about their origins, stories about family members associated with the recipe, and the occasions/celebrations/holidays when the recipes are prepared. Students can collect family recipes along with the social history that gives the recipe meaning to the family.

For instance, one of the Lane family recipes is pound cake. Great-grandmother Lane served pound cake at her 1899 wedding. The cake was baked outside in an oven. In the past, when people cooked with fire, kitchens were often detached from the rest of the house to minimize damage from kitchen fires. A traditional Southern drink called *syllabub* was also served at the wedding. Great-grandmother Lane's descendants still use her recipe to make pound cake for family celebrations.

EXPLORING FAMILY ROOTS: Students can interview their oldest family members to collect family history as many generations back as possible. Great-grandparents may remember stories their great-grandparents told them about the family. The idea is to explore the ultimate limits of the family oral history.

A HISTORY OF MAIN STREET: In this project, students interview long-term owners/operators of downtown businesses about changes they have observed in the community's downtown over the years. Topics for discussion include the downtown's economic rise/fall, ethnic shifts, changes in the socioeconomic status of customers and attempts at historic preservation and downtown revitalization. The purpose is to learn more about downtown: how it began, what it is, and where it seems to be going.

HISTORY OF IMMIGRANT FAMILIES: Fascinating stories can be gathered from people who came to this country in their lifetime, or who are second-generation immigrants. Topics for discussion include: What do the immigrants remember about their homeland? Why did they decide to come to America and Arkansas? What was the immigration process like? What was the most difficult part of the transition to life in America or life in Arkansas? How strong are current ties to the language and culture of the native country?

PRESERVING TRADITIONAL CRAFTS: Are there people in your community who practice almost-forgotten traditional crafts such as making brooms, lye soap or musical instruments; preserving fruit; identifying wild plant foods; churning milk; blacksmithing; building log cabins; or quilting? Find out from the folks in your community what kinds of traditional crafts they remember. You could invite a traditional craftsman to class for a demonstration, or send a team of students to the person's home/workshop. Take photographs and ask questions about the process. The final product should be a document that other people could use to successfully perform the traditional craft. The *Foxfire* books are excellent examples of this kind of oral history project.

THE COMMUNITY AT WAR: Wars have a profound effect on our lives. In the last 100 years, Americans have fought in World War I, World War II, Korea, the Gulf War, Vietnam, Bosnia and Afghanistan. In this project, students interview veterans and citizens who lived on the homefront during the war. Topics could include: ways that wars have changed family roles, differences in combat between several wars, veteran's combat experiences, and the changes in attitudes toward veterans.



Conducting an Oral History Interview

- Create a list of questions and general topics about which to ask the interviewer. For example, an interview with a local farmer might begin with some basic biographical questions such as, “Where were you born?” and “What was your community like growing up?” General topics might include, *Changes in Farming Over the Last 50 Years* or *The Effects of the Depression and WWII on Local Farms*.
- Practice interviewing each other in class.
- Contact the person you want to interview and schedule a date and time for the interview.
- Verify your appointments the day before the interview.
- Interview and/or record in a quiet place.
- Make sure the interviewee understands the purpose of the interview and how you intend to use it. This is not a private conversation. Information from the interview will be shared with classmates, teachers and perhaps the wider community.
- You can choose to have interviewees sign a legal release (see the back of this lesson plan).
- Begin each interview with a statement of who, what, when and where you are interviewing.
- After asking your start-up questions, move to your topics list. Let the discussion guide what questions you ask.
- Be flexible! Ask whatever questions seem interesting and relevant, even if they aren’t on your topics list.
- Listen actively and attentively. Use positive body language such as smiling and nodding. Use verbal encouragement such as, “This is interesting,” or, “This is great information.” However, don’t interrupt the interviewee.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Allow silence. Give the interviewee time to think.
- Most questions should be open enough to get more than a “yes/no” answer.
 - AVOID Closed-Ended Questions:** Did you enjoy being a farmer?
 - USE Open-Ended Questions:** What did you enjoy about farming?
What did you dislike about farming?
- Ask for definitions of words you don’t understand.
- Rephrase and re-ask questions if you don’t get enough information the first time.
- Limit interviews to 1-2 hours in length, depending on the endurance of the interviewee.
- After the interview, make field notes about the interview. Notes could include topics for further research, questions to ask in the next interview, and questions to ask the teacher.
- Analyze the interview. Did you get the information you needed? If not, how could you get it? How could you improve your interview techniques?
- Schedule another interview if necessary.
- Write a thank-you note to the interviewee.

TECHNICAL MATTERS

For projects utilizing audio/visual equipment

- Think about what kind of recording you want to produce, then choose your equipment. For example, does the recording need to have a long life? Does it need to be broadcast quality? Do you want audio or video?
- Use an external microphone for better sound quality, for both audio and video.
- Test your equipment beforehand and get to know how it works under various conditions. Students should practice using the equipment in class before going to the interview.
- If using audio tapes, use sixty-minute tapes. Buy the best tapes you can afford. Use the highest-quality tape recorder you can afford. An inexpensive machine may not hold up to the repeated stops and starts needed for transcribing. A tape recorder with both battery capability and an AC power cord is preferable. Some interviews may need to be conducted outside or away from a power outlet. Test the batteries before the interview.
- If using audio tapes, label and number each tape immediately. Copy each interview tape. Store the original in a safe place and use the copy for transcribing. Tape storage and retrieval is easily organized with an accession system. As tapes are turned in, label each tape with an accession number. Log the accession number and other pertinent interview information into a master index.
- You can also use a digital recorder or a video camera to record interviews. Video cameras are especially useful so the interviewee can be heard and seen. Consider a tripod for a clear picture.

LEGAL RELEASES

The legal release clarifies the conditions under which an oral history interview is made. Legal releases either give complete access to an interview or stipulate the conditions under which the interview can be released. For instance, memoirs of politicians and public figures are sometimes sealed for a certain number of years or until the death of the figure.

The teacher can determine whether or not legal releases are needed. Legal releases are recommended if oral histories are going to be released or donated to the public.

Oral History Project: Legal Release Form

DATE:

I hereby allow (name of school) _____, to use the tape recordings, transcripts, and contents of this oral history interview for whatever scholarly or educational purposes may be determined.

Signature of Interviewee

Signature of Interviewer

Name

Name

Special Restrictions:

TRANSCRIBING

To transcribe is to translate speech into writing, while preserving as much of the original meaning as possible. Transcribing tapes is a laborious process. The only time students need to fully transcribe interview tapes is if other people will need to access the interviews. For instance, if students plan to donate their oral histories to the local library or historical society, transcripts would be very helpful to future historians.

The cardinal rule when transcribing is honesty. Oral historians are obligated to produce the most accurate record possible, preserving both the words and the flavor of an interview. The transcriber should not invent words, correct grammatical mistakes or change the meaning of sentences.

Completing Sentences and Bracketing

You can make your transcript more readable by breaking it into short paragraphs and completing sentences. Brackets can be used to separate the interviewer's speech from that of the interviewee's. Brackets can also be used to add your own words to clarify incomplete sentences.

Spoken:

Well my Great-Granddaddy was a country doctor the kind that traveled around on horseback He would ride that horse out to emergencies at all hours of the day and night if it was late at night he would fall asleep on the horse's back and the horse would carry him on there were so many babies named after him we was living in an old boxcar at the time...

Transcribed:

Well, my Great-Granddaddy was a country doctor, the kind that traveled around on horseback. He would ride that horse out to emergencies at all hours of the day and night. If it was late at night, he would fall asleep on the horse's back and the horse would carry him on [home]. There were so many babies named after him! We was living in an old boxcar at the time.

Footnotes

You can use footnotes to make corrections or provide additional information:

It was the year of the big flood *, and we were worried about our cotton crop. I asked your great-grandmother if she would sell that old silver to tide us over till harvest time.

* 1927

Editing

Transcribing is an editing process. Transcripts should be easy to read. It can be difficult to decide when to leave out or change the interviewee's words. Here are some guidelines:

- The transcriber should not correct the interviewee's grammatical mistakes.
- It is OK to leave out coughs, sneezes and utterances such as "Uh" or "hmm" (unless they add to the meaning).
- You can omit "false starts" such as:

Spoken:

I decided um around 1947 we realized that it was time to move.

Transcribed:

Around 1947 we realized that it was time to move.

Include Your Questions

Future readers will want to know the questions that were asked as well as the answers. Transcripts should have a question/answer format:

Q: How did you feel when you first walked into your new home?

A: Oh, it was nice! I couldn't believe how lucky we were...

Sample Questions

Questions about a historic property

When was this house/building built?
 What do you know about the original owners?
 Please share any interesting stories about previous occupants of this house/building.
 How long have you lived/worked here?
 Why did you decide to move here?
 What exterior and interior changes have been made to this house/building over the years?
 How has this neighborhood changed since you have lived/worked here?
 What do you like about this house/building?
 What do you dislike about this house/building?
 What are your favorite stories about his house/building?
 Is this house/building haunted?
 What does the future hold for this house/building?

Family History Questions

Family Background

Do you know who the first immigrant was in your family? Tell me about him/her.
 How did your parents meet?
 Who were your parents' brothers and sisters?
 When and where were you born?
 Are there any stories associated with your birth?
 Do you have any special memories of your grandparents and great-grandparents?

Childhood and Home Life

What responsibilities did you have in the home?
 Tell me about the schools you attended.
 What do you remember about the house(s) you grew up in?
 Describe the community where you grew up.
 How did you celebrate holidays, birthdays, and other special events? What are your favorite holiday memories?
 Name some special homemade foods you enjoyed as a child.
 Do you have any special recipes that have been handed down in your family?
 Describe the games you played as a child.
 Do you remember any family stories you heard as a child? What is your favorite story about the _____ family?
 What did your mother and father do in their free time?
 What kind of music did you enjoy when you were growing up?
 What kind of clothing did you wear as a child? As a young adult?
 What kind of medicine did you take when you were sick?
 Did your family attend church? If so, tell me about your church and its activities.
 Do you remember any special family beliefs about the weather, good or bad luck, marriage, death, etc?

Married and Adult Life

How did you meet your spouse?
 When and where were you married?
 What were your thoughts when your first child was born?
 What are the most special events that have occurred in your life?
 Have you ever been involved in an accident, fire, flood, etc? Tell me about it.
 What is your life's most important achievement?
 What are your most memorable successes and failures?
 What is the most valuable advice you learned from your elders?

World Events

How did the Great Depression affect your family?
 Did you or any family members serve in any wars? What stories did they share about their war experiences?
 How was your family affected during WWI, WWII, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War?
 How did the _____ war change your life? Your community?

We would like to know how this lesson plan worked in your classroom or group. Please share with us your experience with using this lesson plan and suggestions for improvement.

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