

Preserving the Past with Oral History

Learning from local and statewide historic places

Amy Bennett



ARKANSAS HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAM

Written by Emily Pennel, Education Outreach Coordinator

Updated 2016 by Shelle Stormoe

1000 La Harpe • Little Rock, Arkansas 72201 • Phone (501) 324-9880

Fax (501) 324-9184 • TDD (501) 324-9811

Website: arkansaspreservation.com • Email: educationoutreach@arkansaspreservation.org

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Teaching Oral History

Grade Levels:

7-12

Essential Question:

What can oral history interviews teach us about changes in the cultures of Arkansas and the United States as a whole?

Relevant Curriculum Frameworks

Arkansas History Grades 7-8

- H.7.AH.7-8.8 Analyze social, economic, and political effects of the Civil Rights Movement on various regions in Arkansas from multiple perspectives (e.g., integration, state legislation).
- H.7.AH.7-8.9 Examine social and cultural transformations in Arkansas (e.g., counterculture, drug culture, breakdown of the family, feminist movement, music, art, clothing).

Arkansas History Grades 9-12

- Era6.6.AH.9-12.2 Examine effects of social and cultural transformations on various segments of the population across Arkansas (e.g., counterculture, drug culture, breakdown of the family, feminist movement, music, art, clothing).

American History Since 1890

- Era9.6.USH.1 Analyze the roles of individuals, groups, and the government in securing civil rights during the mid-20th century using a variety of primary and secondary sources (e.g., minorities, women, NAACP, federal court cases, legislation, Twenty-fourth Amendment).
- Era9.6.USH.2 Analyze causes and effects of cultural changes on society in the United States (e.g., changing roles of women, forces of change on the nuclear family, suburbanization).

African American History

- IE.6.AAH.3 Examine various ways African Americans participated in the Civil Rights Movement and the effects of their actions using a variety of primary and secondary sources (e.g., sit-ins, boycotts, marches, speeches, music, methodologies, organizations).
- JU.7.AAH.2 Identify unresolved social, economic, and political challenges for African American men and women from 1970 to the present using a variety of sources representing multiple perspectives.

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 the following materials in this lesson plan:

- Conducting an Oral History Interview
- Technical Matters
- Transcribing
- Example Questions

- Oral history projects can be completed with pen and paper or with a laptop or table computer.
- If available, students can also use video equipment (video cameras, cell phones, etc.).
- Depending on the method chosen to display or publish student work, may need access to a website, blog, or other online space.

Instructional Strategies

1. Choose a topic that is related to one of the important areas listed in the frameworks. For example, if students are learning frameworks for Arkansas History H.7.AH.7-8.8, the topic may be the Civil Rights Movement in a specific Arkansas community. If students are studying American History Since 1890, topics may range from the role of women in a local community and how that role has changed over time, to the rise of suburbanization and how that impacted a specific location in Arkansas. If students are studying African American History and are learning framework JU.7 AAH.2, they may identify one issue like education or employment and how that issue has changed over time in a specific community.
2. Choose interview subjects that can talk to students about the theme they have chosen. Interview subjects may range from their parents or grandparents to community leaders, or residents of a particular neighborhood. They may also include experts on a particular topic, depending on availability.
3. 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. Make sure to include several more questions than you think are absolutely necessary. Ask students to avoid “yes or no” questions whenever possible. Teachers may want to pre-approve a list of questions prior to the interview to may sure that students are focusing on the assigned topic.
4. Decide if students will record the history on paper or with technology.
5. Decide if using legal release forms with interviewees is appropriate for your project. (see Contents page).
6. After students complete their interviews, follow up with class discussion. Instruct students to compile their research into a paper or project.
7. If recording interviews, catalog and store the material in a safe place. You may store files in the cloud, on a computer, on a flash drive, or save material to CDs or DVDs.

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 grandmother, who planted a victory garden and rationed food during WWII, teach us about what it was like to be a citizen on the home front 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.

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.

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.

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 contents section to find the correct page).
- 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.

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?

Oral History Project Ideas ³

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.

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. Focus on how the community has changed as a result of social issues listed in the Frameworks. 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 *How Bentonville changed due to women entering the workplace*. 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 related to the civil right movement or to the societal changes mentioned in the frameworks. For example, the class might want to interview a former sharecropper or farmer, someone who participated in a historic community event, a former mayor, the doctor who provided medical care to the community for 50 years, or someone involved in the Civil Rights movement in your town or county. Let the guest speaker speak on his/her own for a while, 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 as it relates to integration or changes in society listed in the frameworks. 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.

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.

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.

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?

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, Iraq 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, the changes in the military due to the rising prominence of women in combat roles, etc.

HISTORY OF A NEIGHBORHOOD, BLOCK OR BUILDING: Examining the history of a specific neighborhood, block or building has provide a concrete example of how a particular place has changed over time in response to various social pressures and issues. For example, a history of the Governor's Mansion neighborhood in Little Rock would also by necessity cover the changing family, the rise in suburbanization, changing demographics, life in African American communities, etc.

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 a digital audio recorder, use the highest-quality recorder you can afford. An inexpensive machine may not hold up to the repeated stops and starts needed for transcribing. A 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 digital recorder or cell phone, label and number each interview immediately. Copy each interview. Store the original in a safe place, like on the cloud or in a Dropbox, and use the copy for transcribing. As files 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 video 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: