

## BASIC TECHNIQUES FOR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWING

### "The 5 R's"

The oral history interviewer should strive to create a situation in which the interviewee is able to reflect widely, to recall fully, and to associate freely on the subject of the interview, and to maintain an atmosphere in which (s)he is willing to articulate fully those recollections.

Five essential considerations for the oral history interviewer, expressed alliteratively for ease of recall, are:

1. **RESEARCH**: Thorough preparation not only enables the interviewer to know what questions to ask but also is essential in establishing rapport with the interviewee, by demonstrating that the interviewer is seriously interested in the topic. research pays off during the interview. when the interviewer's knowledge of names, dates and places may jog the interviewee's memory. Knowledge of existing information also permits the interviewer to avoid the time and expense of duplicating such information in the interview.
2. **RAPPORT**: Good rapport is established with the interviewee by approaching him properly, informing him of the purpose and procedures of the project, and advising him of his role in the undertaking and his rights in regard to it. You may wish to approach your informant by letter; not only is it polite but it identifies you and can give him/her something to think about. A pre-interview visit to get acquainted and discuss procedures may be advisable in many cases.
3. **RESTRAINT**: The experienced interviewer maintains rapport by following good interviewing techniques: being efficient by unobtrusive equipment, starting at the beginning and proceeding chronologically, following up on details or unexpected avenues of information, challenging questionable information in a nonthreatening way, and generally maintaining an atmosphere in which the interviewee feels able to respond fully and truthfully, regardless of what his response is.
4. **RETREAT**: Each interview session deserves a graceful closing, even when additional sessions are planned with the same interviewee. Asking a "deflationary" question, such as an assessment of the experiences just discussed, is a good way to conclude a session. All sessions should be planned and scheduled so that they conclude before the interviewee becomes fatigued.
5. **REVIEW**: Interviewers should listen to their interviews as soon afterward as possible, not only to pick up details to follow up in subsequent

sessions but also to analyze their interviewing techniques and their impact on the success of the interview.

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**ECHO PARK  
ORAL HISTORY QUESTIONNAIRE**

NAME (MAIDEN)

MALE/FEMALE

ADDRESS

WHERE WERE YOU BORN?

BIRTHDATE

**PARENTS' NAMES**

WHERE WERE YOUR PARENTS BORN?

WHERE DID THEY MEET?

WHERE DID THEY LIVE WHEN THEY MARRIED?

WHAT WERE THEIR OCCUPATIONS & WHERE WERE THEY EMPLOYED?

WHAT ARE YOUR EARLIEST MEMORIES OF YOUR **MOTHER**?

WHAT TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP DID YOU HAVE WITH YOUR MOTHER?

WHAT VALUE DID YOUR MOTHER TEACH YOU THAT YOU CARRY TO THIS DAY?

DO YOU HAVE **SIBLINGS**?

SIBLINGS' NAMES?

WHERE WERE YOU IN THE BIRTH ORDER?

WERE YOUR PLAYMATES YOUR SIBLINGS OR YOUR FRIENDS?

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR **GRANDPARENTS**. WERE YOU CLOSE TO THEM?

WHAT WERE THEIR NAMES AND WHERE WERE THEY BORN?

WHAT STANDS OUT IN YOUR MEMORY ABOUT THEM?

DO YOU RECALL ANY **FAMILY GATHERINGS** THAT WERE IMPORTANT TO YOU?

WHAT WAS YOUR **RELIGION**? DID IT HAVE AN IMPACT ON YOUR LIFE?

WHAT DID YOU LIKE TO DO AS A **CHILD**? TALK ABOUT SOME OF YOUR FAVORITE MEMORIES AS A CHILD.

WHO WAS YOUR BEST FRIEND? WHERE DID YOU PLAY? WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT YOUR FRIEND'S FAMILY & HOME?

DID YOU HAVE PETS? WHAT WERE THEIR NAMES?

CAN YOU SHARE ANY SPECIAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUR CHILDHOOD?

PLEASE DESCRIBE AN AVERAGE DAY WHEN YOU WERE 10 YEARS OLD.

WHAT WAS YOUR OLD ADDRESS IN ECHO PARK?

DO YOU HAVE ANY SPECIAL STORIES ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES IN ECHO PARK?

WHAT WERE THE VIEWS OUTSIDE YOUR WINDOWS?

WHAT STORES DO YOU REMEMBER IN ECHO PARK?

WHO DELIVERED TO YOUR HOME? MILKMAN? ICEMAN? OTHERS?

WHAT WAS YOUR STREET LIKE? BUSY OR QUIET? PAVED? STOPLIGHT OR STOP SIGN?

HOW DID YOU KEEP COOL IN SUMMER?

DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR PHONE NUMBER?

WHAT WERE NEIGHBORHOOD LANDMARKS? WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THEM?

HOW WAS YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD LIT? STREETLIGHTS? PORCHLIGHT?

HOW DID YOU TRAVEL DOWNTOWN?

WHERE WAS THE LIBRARY?

WHAT **SCHOOLS** DID YOU ATTEND & THE YEARS? PUBLIC? PRIVATE?

WHAT DID IT LOOK LIKE?

DID YOU ENJOY SCHOOL?

WHAT WERE YOUR FAVORITE CLASSES?

WHAT WERE SCHOOLROOMS LIKE? LONG TABLES? INDIVIDUAL DESKS?

DESCRIBE SCHOOL PLAYGROUND. GAMES, CAFETERIA, LUNCH AREA,  
TEACHERS.

DO YOU REMEMBER SCHOOL VISITORS? MAYOR? ACTORS? COWBOY  
STARS?

DO YOU REMEMBER FIELD TRIPS?

WHAT WAS SUMMER VACATION LIKE?

DID YOU HAVE SCHOOL PLAYS? WERE YOU IN THEM?

DURING HIGH SCHOOL, WERE YOU ON THE SCHOOL PAPER?

WERE YOU INVOLVED IN SCHOOL SPORTS?

WERE YOU A CLASS OFFICER? CHEERLEADER?

DID YOU EARN A VARSITY LETTER?

WERE YOU PART OF HOMECOMING COURT?

WERE YOU AN HONOR STUDENT?

WHAT WERE HOLIDAYS LIKE? WHERE DID YOU WATCH FOURTH OF JULY

FIREWORKS? HOW DID YOU CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS/HANUKKAH?

HALLOWEEN?

WERE YOU SHY, AN EXTROVERT, A BOOKWORM?

DID YOU ENJOY SPORTS?

WHAT WERE YOUR HOBBIES?

PLEASE DESCRIBE AN AVERAGE DAY WHEN YOU WERE 15 YEARS OLD.

WERE YOU RESTLESS AT THAT AGE?

WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE AROUND THAT TIME?

HAD YOUR GOALS CHANGED SINCE GRAMMAR SCHOOL?

WHAT DID YOU WANT TO DO AFTER GRADUATION FROM HIGH SCHOOL?

WHAT UNIVERSITY DID YOU ATTEND?

WHAT WAS YOUR MAJOR?

WERE YOU ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH THAT GOAL? WHY OR WHY NOT?

WHAT FINALLY LED YOU TO YOUR PARTICULAR FIELD OF WORK?

WHAT PART-TIME JOBS MIGHT YOU HAVE HELD?

WHERE DID YOUR CROWD HANG OUT? WHAT WERE THE CLOTHING  
TRENDS?

WHAT ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF WORLD WAR II? DID YOU SAVE TINFOIL?

WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT RATIONING AND AIR-RAID DRILLS?

WHAT FORMS OF ENTERTAINMENT DO YOU REMEMBER?

DO YOU REMEMBER THE FILM INDUSTRY IN ECHO PARK? ACTORS WHO  
LIVED HERE? OTHER NOTED PEOPLE WHO LIVED HERE?

WHAT RESTAURANTS WERE HERE? OTHER BUSINESSES?

WHAT WAS THE JENSEN RECREATION CENTER LIKE? DID YOU USE IT?

CAN YOU GIVE A FEW MEMORIES ABOUT THE RAMONA THEATER & ECHO  
PARK LAKE?

DID YOU STAY IN ECHO PARK AFTER YOU MARRIED? WHERE?

WERE YOU A COMMUNITY ACTIVIST?

WHICH OF THOSE ACTIVITIES DID YOU PARTICIPATE IN?

WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO VOLUNTEER FOR THE COMMUNITY?

WHAT WAS THE BIGGEST BUSINESS HERE?

HOW & WHERE WERE CLOTHES CLEANED?

HOW MUCH WAS GASOLINE? POSTAGE STAMPS?

DO YOU REMEMBER CRIMES COMMITTED HERE?

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### **TIPS FOR INTERVIEWERS**

1. An interview is not a dialogue. Limit your remarks to a few pleasantries to break the ice, then brief questions to guide her along. It is not necessary to tell her your family experience to get her to tell you about hers. Just say, "I understand your grandfather came around the Horn to California. What did he tell you about the trip?"

2. Ask questions that require more of an answer than "yes" or "no." Start with why, "how," "where." "what kind of..." instead of "Was Henry Miller a good boss?" Ask "What did the cowhands think of Henry Miller as a boss?"
3. Ask one question at a time. Sometimes interviewers ask a series of questions at once. Probably the narrator will answer only the first or last one.
4. Ask brief questions. It is unlikely that the narrator is so dull that it takes more than a sentence or two for her to understand the question.
5. Start with questions that are not controversial; save the delicate questions, if there are any, until you have become better acquainted.
6. Don't let periods of silence fluster you. Give your narrator a chance to think of what she wants to add before you go onto the next thing on your agenda.
7. Don't worry if your questions are not as beautifully phrased as you would like. A few fumbled questions will help put your subject at ease.
8. Don't interrupt a good story because you have thought of a question, or because your narrator is straying from the planned outline. If the information is pertinent, let her go on, but jot down your question on your notepad so you remember to ask it later.
9. If you narrator does stray into subjects that are not pertinent, try to pull her back as soon as possible. "Before we move on, I'd like to find out how the closing of the mine in 1935 affected your family's finances. Do you remember that?"
10. Often it is hard for a narrator to describe people. Begin with asking her to describe the person's appearance. This usually enables the narrator to move on to character description.
11. Interviewing is one time when a negative approach is more effective than a positive one. Ask about the negative situation. An example: "Despite the mayor's reputation for good works, I hear he was difficult to work for." You are more apt to get a lively response this way, whether she admired him or not.
12. Try to establish at every point in the story where the narrator was or what her role was in this event, in order to indicate how much is eyewitness information and how much is based on the reports of others.
13. Do not challenge accounts you think may be inaccurate. Instead, try to develop as much information as possible that can be used by later researchers.
14. Tactfully point out that there is a different account of what she is describing, if there is. This is not a challenge to her memories; rather it is an opportunity for her to bring up further evidence.



15. Try to avoid "off the record" information.
16. Don't switch the recorder off and on. It calls too much attention to the fact the interview is being recorded.
17. Interviews usually work out better if there is no one present except the narrator and the interviewer.
18. End the interview at a reasonable time. An hour and a half is the maximum.
19. Most important, don't use the interview to show off your own knowledge, vocabulary, charm or other abilities. Good interviewers do not shine: only their interviewees do.