HOW TO RECORD AN ORAL HISTORY

The people in your community are likely to be a good source of information about events and changes that have taken place in your region. One person's memories of an event might differ from someone else's but they help build a picture that is rich in detail. If you capture that information, you'll enrich your own project and also contribute to the documented knowledge of the community.

There are numerous ways to include people's stories in your project:
• a still photograph of a person next to written quotes from them
• a still photograph of a person with an audio recording of their voice
• an audio recording, without a picture
• a video recording of a person speaking to camera

What you need
• a person or people to interview (interviewees)
• a good recording device with a microphone — as small and unobtrusive as possible
• extra batteries, tapes and/or data cards
• copyright clearance and model release forms for your interviewee to sign

Copyright clearance and model release forms
You must obtain written permission to reproduce a person's words in any form — either written or on audio or video. You also need permission to reproduce their image. Do this by asking them to complete and sign a copyright clearance form and a model release form. You must be specific on the forms about how you intend to use the material from the interview. If your interviewee is under 18 years of age, their parent or guardian must sign both forms. Keep the original signed forms for your own records and give copies to the interviewee.

What to do
Find your interviewee. You might already know the perfect person to interview; if not, ask community groups for suggestions. You can appeal via the local newspaper or radio but be specific about what you want or you could be swamped with applicants. This is also a good opportunity to promote your project to the community.

Research their story
If you’re interviewing a person about their memory of a particular place or event, find out as much as you can about it before you go to see the person. Use books, newspapers and any other historical records about the time. Is there anything written by or about the person? The more background information you have, the better.

Prepare your questions
Use your research to prepare questions for the interview that are relevant both to the interviewee’s story and to your project. Keep your questions clear and brief. Phrase your questions so they require fuller answers than just yes or no. For example, instead of asking ‘Were you afraid when that happened?’, ask ‘How did you feel when that happened?’.

Visit your interviewee
Ask to visit the person for an initial discussion. This is likely to make the person more comfortable about being interviewed. Take the prepared set of questions. Explain that these will act as a guide but that they might also lead to other questions. Ask if there are any aspects of their story that they are not comfortable talking about. Explain the project fully and be clear about whether you will be making an audio or video recording. Give the person a copyright clearance form so that they have time to review it and ask questions. Explain that the interview will be about 30 minutes long at most.
Discuss possible locations for the interview, taking particular care about sound. Minimise the potential for distracting or intrusive noise. If it's a video recording, you will also need to think about lighting and background image. This visit is a great opportunity to ask if the person has photographs or other items that could be displayed or copied for your project. Before you leave, give the interviewee your contact details in case they have any questions.

The interview

Before the interview, familiarise yourself with your recording device. Allow plenty of time to make new arrangements if there is a problem. On the day, ensure that the device is fully charged or has new batteries.

Before you begin the interview, outline again for your interviewee what you hope to achieve in the interview and what its role is in your project. Tell them that they can stop at any time and ask for a question to be repeated. Explain that only a small portion of the recording is likely to be used, that your own questions will be cut out and that only the interviewee's responses will be included. Ask them to incorporate the question into their response. For example, if the question is ‘How did you feel when you had to sell your farm?'; the response could be phrased, 'When I had to sell my farm, I felt...'.

Turn off your mobile phone. If you are videoing, ask your interviewee not to wave their hands too much. If you are recording audio, avoid any contact with the microphone or with the table or surface that's holding the device.

To start, record your name, the location and the date. Ask the interviewee to say their name. Check that the recorder is working properly. It is natural to verbally acknowledge people during conversation but try to avoid saying ‘uh huh,’ ‘yes’ or ‘mmmm’. Use non-verbal communication to reassure your subject: nod your head or smile. And don't interrupt. Really listen to what your interviewee is saying rather than worrying about the next question. This will make the person more comfortable and give you the chance to follow up interesting points. If it's an important question and your interviewee doesn't give you a response that you can use, quickly and kindly explain the situation and give them a chance to respond again. If the person is very nervous, turn the start of the session into a ‘practice run’, so it doesn't matter if they make mistakes. They'll soon settle in to it.

After you finish recording, continue talking to your interviewee, particularly if it has been an emotional topic. Take time to talk about how valuable their input will be for your project. Check if there is anything that came up in conversation that they are not comfortable about being used. If there is, you are morally bound not to use it. They can sign a copyright clearance form after you've edited the recording but, if there is no problem, ask them to sign a copyright clearance form at this time.

After the interview

The next step is to transcribe the interview into written form. This will be time consuming but it's the best way to find good quotes that enrich your project. It will be easier to skim written pages than to listen to lengthy tapes again and again. Make a copy of the recording, keeping the original as your ‘safety master’. Edit the copy to include the material that you want to use. Two to four minutes of sound or video works well in an exhibition.

Personally take a copy of the full interview and the edited version to your interviewee. If they have not already signed a copyright clearance form, give one to them. If necessary, allow a couple of days for them to review the interview then go back and collect the signed form.

Remember that you cannot use someone's words or image without their written consent.

If, for any reason, your project changes or is delayed, inform your interviewees. They have been generous with their memories; be courteous in return. If there is a launch for your project or an associated event, invite them to attend.