

Sharing Stories with each other: Collecting oral histories of our community.

Klaebe, Helen G. (2007)

Contents

- 1. INTRODUCTION**
- 2. WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?**
- 3. WHERE TO START**
 - 3.1 create a project**
 - 3.2 conduct the research**
 - 3.3 devising the copyright/clearance forms**
 - 3.4 plot your course**
 - 3.5 knowing whom to interview**
 - 3.6 organising the interview**
 - 3.7 location of interview**
- 4. THE EQUIPMENT**
 - 4.1 audio**
 - 4.2 video**
 - 4.3 camera**
 - 4.4 scanner**
- 5. THE INTERVIEWING PROCESS**
 - 5.1 copyright/clearance forms**
 - 5.2 Setting up equipment**
 - 5.3 the interview**
 - 5.4 getting the questions right**
 - 5.4 before you go**
- 6. PROCESSING THE DATA**
 - 6.1 backing up**
 - 6.2 transcribing**
 - 6.3 interview logs**
 - 6.4 involving the participant**
 - 6.4 tracking changes**
- 7. OTHER WAYS OF PRESENTING THE WORK**
 - 7.1 publications**
 - 7.2 digital storytelling**
 - 7.3 exhibitions**
 - 7.4 public art**
- 8. REFERENCES**

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a philosophical movement towards valuing the ordinary stories of everyday people as opposed to the rigid, hierarchical histories that reflect a more academic view.

This booklet aims to offer oral history as a tool to be used by communities to see their history from a social or humanist stance. Allowing the public to create a collective narrative about the people and places in their surrounds that form part of our contemporary Australian history.

The popularity of creative non fiction biographies and autobiographies of the ‘not so famous’ is testimony to the importance now placed on the human face of history. This insatiable desire for experiencing the reality of everyday people’s lives spills over and is evident in mass media. Even though oral history relies on participants’ memory, a carefully constructed oral

history collection can be a crucial primary source for researchers to use in making the stories of our past ‘come alive’.

My aim is to help you create a collection that is credible, accurate, yet of popular interest. To do this you will learn to ‘marry’ academic research with a social, historical philosophy that translates to a selection of recalled stories that give a human picture to the facts that accompany them, allowing the reader to individually interpret the stories about a chapter of your local community history.

2. WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history is an accepted part of heritage work. It is a method often used by communities to capture their social history. Australian communities are diverse and are an important source of knowledge and memories about our culture and heritage.

An oral history is:

- An audio recorded interview (questions and answers)
- Usually conducted by a person who has extensively researched the topic
- With an interviewee who is speaking first hand about an historical experience

3. where to start

Ideas for projects come from many different places. Often they are triggered by a particular interest in a community group wanting to ‘keep a record’ of their own group. Sometimes ideas will come from people who are working in the community as part of their work, for instance a council member or community worker or librarian.

3.1 create a project

It is important however that the group being interviewed have first hand knowledge or experience about the topic in question. In other words, the interviewee needs to have a ‘living memory’ of the subject.

It is important also to have a narrow focus when interviewing. It is not possible to effectively allow a person to ‘tell their life story’ in an interview. Rather, it is more helpful to ask them about a particular part or event of their life, so that the material recorded is becomes a richer resource.

It is therefore important to decide what the focus of the project exactly is. This is called defining the scope and scale of the project. At this point, the group conducting the research should be able to identify:

- How the project will contribute to our cultural heritage?
- Will the project broaden the public’s perception of the topic in question?
- Do we have the resources to conduct the project?

3.2 conduct the research

The preservation of personal stories and observations utilising audio recording is central to the process of any oral history. To make best use of the opportunity, the interviewer must first research the people being interviewed to give the conversation context and form.

Such preparation will prove to be very helpful in highlighting each interviewee’s particular relationship with the topic and let the interviewer identify and gather the interviewee’s tacit knowledge. A strong understanding of the topic, or ‘background knowledge’ will strengthen the construction of a question list.

Until the interviewing process begins, the interviewer has no idea of the richness of the material interviewees will share. The interviewer thus needs to be aware “of the peculiarities of memory, be imaginative in their methods of dealing with it, conscious to its limitations and open to its abundant treasures”¹ and you need to be prepared!

Comparing and contrasting historical material that is already published on your topic is critical. To conduct effective oral history interviews, the research strategy should be to gather and collate all known archived source material about the subject. This can include newspapers, photographs, television and radio documentary material, as well as books or journal articles. Libraries are an essential source of information — including your local library, but also specialised libraries, for instance in Queensland, the State Library (including John Oxley Library), Fryer Library, University libraries and others such as the Mitchell Library, The National Library of Australia and the Australian War Memorial.

Most libraries also offer online services and resources. Also local history groups, museums, the local council office (including specialised heritage, parks and survey departments for instance). Electronic sources can be fantastic, but also overwhelming and not always accurate. Always check the validity of the websites you visit and be sure to record as you go all references used.

3.3 devising the copyright and ethical clearance

Copyright and ethical considerations are of paramount importance in any oral history project and strict guidelines need to be established very early in proceedings. Copyright and ethical clearance awards the creator the right to own the material they produce. This also means they have the right to change and manipulate text, audio or images as they choose and publish work where and how they choose. In order to do this however, each interviewee must sign a contract awarding the right for this to occur to the interviewee, or the organization conducting the research.

For group history to unite successfully, the potential dilemma of contracts, intellectual property, copyright and moral rights clauses impinging on research outcomes has to be negotiated. The interviewer should aspire to find best practice methods of representing the past by creating shared cultural knowledge in the ‘vehicles of memory’ (Green, 2004) used, whether it is in text, video or audio form. Yet to gather a collective spirit, many individuals must want to freely contribute their stories.

The intention of the interview process is to not hinder the participant’s understanding or opportunity to recount an open, honest response and so a substantial amount of time needs to be taken before all interviews are conducted to explain copyright and ethical clearance with the interviewee.

If the interview is going to become part of a collection that will be deposited at a local or State library, it is important to also use their copyright forms as well. There are many examples of copyright and ethical clearance forms and it is important to decide the boundaries of your project, the intended purpose of the collection and ensure that your intentions are clearly explained. Many researchers however strive to include the interviewee in the ongoing process of developing the ‘material’ gathered.

Creative Commons^[2] is an important website that is working towards helping communities solve this dilemma. People accessing the site would recognise immediately the type of copyright the contributor intended to give, by the symbols displayed. There is great value in educating as many people as possible about this new copyright direction — both to protect the practitioners’ and contributors’ rights.

3.4 plot your course

The role of the interviewer and mediator is central to the project. Oral history techniques need to provide a non-threatening environment for the interviewees to respond in an open and honest approach, yet allowed the research to be collated and archived in a methodical manner. To do this effectively, time must be taken to plot the course of how the interviews will be conducted. The plan must address:

- Who will be interviewed
- The length of the interviews
- How they will be recorded
- What will be asked of the interviewees
- Where they will be interviewed

3.5 knowing whom to interview

It is very helpful to first create a chronological timeline of the period under investigation. Next, brainstorm possible themes or topics that relate to the topic and attach these to the timeline. From the possible list of interviewees, see where their personal story might best 'fit'. A preliminary phone call to each possible participant is very important. By explaining the project and your interest in them in particular, initial questions can establish whether:

- the person is interested in participating
- identify whether they would be available to be interviewed
- place each individual on your 'mud map'
- identify gaps
- identify other possible interviewees

3.6 organising the interview

It is important to be very courteous to each interviewee. This should go without saying, but can sometimes be overlooked by enthusiastic researchers. People are not only giving you their time, they are also giving you the very special gift of their personal stories. Treat each with respect and you will be rewarded with the richness of sharing a special bond and moment with a fellow human being.

Some basic considerations are to:

- telephone or write well in advance to arrange a time that is convenient to the interviewee and give them an outline of the types of questions you might ask them and the time frame or event you will be discussing
- Be punctual when you meet
- Set up all equipment first, and check it is functioning
- Explain and organise the signing of copyright or ethical clearance forms before you start the interview

3.7 location of interview

An oral history interview can be conducted almost anywhere, but consideration needs to be taken into account about:

- The health and mobility of the interviewee
- What might be a psychologically neutral or 'comfortable' location for the interviewee
- Whether the location will have excessive background noise that might be encumbering to the recording. Be wary of clocks, birds, traffic, air-conditioning units for instance.

4. THE EQUIPMENT

Qualitative researchers nearly always audio record and then transcribe their interviews[3].

This is standard practice in oral history interviewing, but as a qualitative research method, it is also important for the following reasons:

- It helps the natural limitations of the interviewer’s memory — allowing a more thorough examination of what was said at a later date
- It opens up the data for public scrutiny (and in the case of an oral history collection - public use)
- Helps to counter accusations of bias and allows the data to be reused by subsequent researchers — which is also the reason why oral history transcripts are kept in public libraries.

It is wise to devise an equipment checklist that includes portable recording, photographic and scanning equipment and checklists on how to go about recording.

4.1 audio

Oral history interviews have traditionally been recorded with a tape recorder, but increasingly these days, it is expected that the interview will be captured as a digital recording. Beth Robertson, in conjunction with the Oral history Association of Australia (OHAA) have published their thoughts on what works best[4], but this will also be dependent on resources available to the group. They have rated most commonly used recording devices out of a score of 5, with 5 being the optimal score:

<u>Device</u>	<u>Score</u>
• Standard cassette recorders	1
• Digital business recorders	1
• Mp3 recorders (including iPods)	1
• Mini disc recorders	2
• Digital audio tape (DAT) recorders	3
• CD recorders	4
• Recording onto a laptop	5

The type of microphone used in the process is also an important choice that needs to be made in relation to resources available and depending on the recording device used.

4.2 video

Many researchers now video record their interviews. This data can then provide a visual element that can be used in the presentation of material at a later date, for an exhibition or documentary for instance.

4.3 camera

A camera is also a useful auxiliary tool in oral history interviews, as photographs of the interviewee can remind the researcher of the interview — especially if you are conducting several interviews. Again, photographs can be used in publications and exhibitions to add another level of context to the transcripts. A digital camera can also take photographs of objects or memorabilia that an interviewee may bring to an interview, or share with the interviewer after the questions have been answered.

4.4 scanner

Often researchers also carry a portable flat bed scanner with their equipment, as often interviewees will produce photographs or letters at the time of the interview. It is my strong suggestion that interviewers DO NOT BORROW photographs or an object of significance to the interviewee, as the responsibility to you is not worth it. People are very attached to their personal belongings with good reason. Be respectful of this. Make sure you also secure any additional copyright or ethical clearance for additional images or objects you copy.

5. THE INTERVIEWING PROCESS

5.1 copyright/clearance forms

This is an example of the types of information required in a consent form:

Kelvin Grove Urban Village History Project

A social history of the Kelvin Grove community

Public Historian/project manager: Helen Klæbe

Contact details: h.klaebe@student.qut.edu.au

Phone: 07-3864 9664 or c/o Creative Writing and Cultural Studies

I Block, Level 2, Room 216, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove, Q, 4059.

Digital Storytelling: Jean Burgess

Contact Details: je.burgess@qut.edu.au

Creative Industries Research and Applications Centre (CIRAC)

Z1-515, Creative Industries Precinct

Queensland University of Technology

130 Victoria Park Road

Kelvin Grove QLD 4059

Creative Director: Professor Philip Neilsen

Contact details: p.neilsen@qut.edu.au

Phone: 3864 8261

Aim

The aim of this project is to collect life stories through interviews, and then use these interviews to make a selection of stories that will trace the history of Kelvin Grove over the years of its existence as a Brisbane suburb.

Kelvin Grove Urban Village History Project (KGVVHP) is a flagship project which represents the result of a long term and innovative collaboration between State Government departments and QUT.

By including testimonies from past and present community members, we would like to weave together a story about the people and community groups who have lived in the Kelvin Grove area.

Outcomes

It is proposed that the project's achievements be captured in an online archive (living website), two substantial historical/social printed books, and art exhibitions, which will be key elements in an exercise to record the social history and heritage of Kelvin Grove Urban Village and its surrounding community.

Part one of this project involves the collection of the history and the launch of the KGVVHP website. Part two and three a compilation of stories into a publishable manuscript and art exhibitions. These latter two parts are being conducted as part of some QUT students' research studies and undergraduate assessment. The publication will include photographs, archival records and other memorabilia of interest.

The history books and exhibitions will be on the public record as recognition of the Kelvin Grove area. The books will be a marketable product recognising the human face of Kelvin Grove.

Expected benefits

Your involvement in this project will not directly benefit you; however, it is hoped that this project will capture a piece of important Queensland history, while also recording the current change to the suburb, due to the KGUV development and how the suburb changes and grows in the new 21st century.

Confidentiality

The information given by interviewees during this project may or may not be used by the KGUVHP as material in the writing of the books for publication, part of the website, digital storytelling or art exhibitions.

The information may also be accessed by the KGUVHP or postgraduate research students for further articles in publications such as broadsheet newspapers, organisational newsletters, academic journals, magazines, and electronic websites. The project may be discussed on radio or television. This would be purely for promotional benefit of the project.

Voluntary participation

Participants are advised that their participation is voluntary. Individuals' participation in the research, the collection of data for a QUT purpose, and the subsequent use / publication of this data, requires consent. Your decision whether to participate in this project is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without comment or penalty.

Questions/further information

For additional information about the project, or to have any questions answered.

Helen Klaebe (KGUV public historian): h.klaebe@qut.edu.au

Phone (07) 3864 9664

Or c/o Creative Writing and Cultural Studies

I Block

Level 2, Room 216

Victoria Park Road

Kelvin Grove Q 4059

Or to: Professor Philip Neilsen (KGUVHP Creative Director) at p.neilsen@qut.edu.au or phone (07) 3864 8261

Concerns/complaints

Potential participants should be advised that if they have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project they should contact the Research Ethics Committee Officer on 3864 2340, by email on ethicscontact@qut.edu.au or by post at GPO Box 2434, Brisbane, Q, 4001, Australia.

CONSENT FORM

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- have read and understood the information sheet about this project;
- have had any questions answered to your satisfaction;
- understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team;
- understand that you are free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty;
- understand that you can contact the research team if you have any questions about the project, or the Research Ethics Committee Officer on (07) 3864 2340 if they have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project; and
- agree to participate in the project.

Name

Name of Guardian (if participant under 18 years of age)

Date

5.2 Setting up equipment

The interviewer needs to be prepared for interviews conducted 'in the field. Plan ahead to ensure your equipment pack is complete. Here is a basic equipment list to use as a starting point:

- Digital camera
- Memory card
- Battery
- Battery charger
- Scanner
- Camera to laptop download cord
- Scanner to laptop download cord
- iPod to laptop download cord
- Laptop
- Power cord for laptop
- Extension cord
- Multi plug- 4
- Pen
- Note pad

5.3 the interview

It is quite natural to feel a little nervous before your first interview. Each time, the process will become a little easier. It is important to remember the interviewees are not used to being interviewed either, and so they might feel a little uneasy also. Be natural and yourself, speak politely, but in an informal way and you will be more likely to put both of you at ease. Most interviewers use three lines of questioning: orientation, common and more specific questions as a way to 'ease' you both into a comfort zone that allows you both to feel like you are having a conversation with friend about a topic of mutual interest.

5.4 getting the questions right

A list of general questions can be devised as an adaptable starting point, depending on the interviewee. This way the overall theme and general data about the interviewees will be the same. Basic questions that need to be first asked however might be:

- Name:
- Current position
- Address:
- Phone
- Email

Once these formalities are established, the interviewer should start the recording by stating:

- The name of the interviewer
- The name of the interviewee
- The date
- The place
- And detail of the name of the project

Questions need to be constructed so as to not receive a 'closed response', that is, 'yes or no answers. Open questions might include asking:

- Dates/time involved with subject?
- What was your role at that time?
- How do you remember the event?
- Changes you saw while involved in the conflict/organisation?
- Any stories (happy, inspirational, funny) that evoke memories, or ‘stick out’ when you think of that period of your life?
- What are your thoughts on the subject now?

From here, you can start to navigate into more individualised questioning, directly related to your topic. While a conversation will ‘wander’, it is important that the interviewer stays in control and can move the conversation along, or slow it down to gain more depth about a particular incident for instance.

Be sensitive to the interviewee. Some topics are hard emotionally for them to recall. Let them take their time — give them a moment if need be, but it is best to keep the recording rolling. It is important that the interviewer listens quietly, patiently and carefully.

5.4 before you go

While it may seem obvious, it is important to thank your interviewee for their contribution and time — and do this on the recording. This then clearly marks the end of the interview for any subsequent listeners accessing the material in the future. It is also important to offer to provide a copy of the audio (if they wish) and a transcribed copy of the transcript at a later date. This is crucial, as it gives the interviewee the opportunity to check for mistakes in the spelling of names, dates and places, and ensure that the interviewee is still happy to allow the material to be used.

6. PROCESSING THE DATA

Careful processing of the material can be made simpler if all data has been well marked and simple processing procedures are adhered to. In a community project, a lot of these details will be determined at the start and again will depend on resources.

6.1 backing up

Not every interviewer will record a back up of the audio, but some do.

While I currently use a laptop to record, I often have my iPod recording as well. Do not run two recording devices next to each other, as they can pick up the same background noise eg from the hard drive of the recording device.

6.2 transcribing

Transcribing is hard work. In fact, one hour of audio takes a professional transcriber between three and five hours to type up. Something to remember when you are interviewing! Libraries will have particular formats they will need you to adhere to, if your collection will become part of a library collection. It is also important that a copy of the transcript is sent to the interviewee.

6.3 interview logs

Interview logs are a way to help let researchers ‘find their way’ through the material. The most common way to log the interview is to use three columns that run alongside the text. They can contain notes that:

- Log the time
- Notes about the subject
- Any significant words- eg names or places

While not all researcher use all of these makers, most at least log the time. This gives the reader of the transcript cues in which to find specific sections of the audio.

6.4 involving the participant

It is important to provide a copy of the interview for the interviewee. It is however, a really good idea to provide a covering letter alerting the interviewee to idiosyncrasies of a transcript. The main element that surprises the interviewee is how they ‘sound on paper’. The fact that we speak very differently to how we write text. Often sentences include patterns of ‘ers and ums’ and are not grammatically correct. It is important not to change the text to ‘good writing’ – at this point it is important that the text is true to the audio. This means the transcript can be used subsequently as a primary document.

6.4 tracking changes

I have found it helpful to let the interviewee mark any changes on either a hard copy or via email using track changes in word, if the interviewee is comfortable with new technology. This allows the interviewer to keep a record of any changes. If the changes are substantial, they should be discussed in person with the interviewee to understand their concerns. Even if the changes are minimal, make sure a clean copy of the amended transcript is sent to the interviewee, with a thankyou letter.

7. OTHER WAYS OF PRESENTING THE WORK

7.1 publications

In your creative work, you might also need to consolidate social components of history into text. There are many mediums that are text based that use oral history collections as a primary source. Some of these include:

- **Books**

Writing a narrative about the ‘story’ that synthesizes the historical facts with a human reflection on that time and space, but that is also a ‘good read’ for the general community is a challenging, but rewarding experience.

- **Oral history collection**

An oral history collection may be of interest to future oral/public historians, researchers and the general public alike.

- **Booklets and brochures**

Sometimes a book is not required, but a brochure or booklet might be developed from the material

- **Website**

A lot of libraries and community groups now have websites, and this is also a good place to post summaries of your project, so as to ‘signpost’ the oral history collection’s availability to interested parties. The web also offers the platform to store and share audio clips for the public to access.

- **Park signage**

More and more communities, both old and new are looking for ways to connect their future with the history of their locale. Signage can contribute significantly to the urban landscape and also present an opportunity to provide historical content that reinforces the identity, authenticity, and cultural significance of a site.

7.2 digital storytelling

Digital storytelling (DST) is a relatively new form of telling personally narrated stories. A digital story generally includes a combination of a personally narrated piece of writing (audio track) with photographic images and sometimes music or other sounds. These components amalgamate to produce a 2-3 minute film (see attached disc for examples of military-oriented DSTs created during the project).

7.3 exhibitions

Consider these and other pieces of history, such as photographs, letters, objects (such as war medals or school certificates) to not only prompt memory while interviewing, but also to complement the interview transcript. Walker says photographs are a way of "...thinking about social life that escapes the traps set by language"[5]. This was important in the process of creating the digital stories and also the interviews for the book, as often photographs and objects prompted the stories. This was another reason for conducting interviews in the comfort of the interviewees' own surroundings, where such items were easily accessible and helped the interviewee relax.

7.4 public art

The Kelvin Grove Urban Village public art initiatives were well received by the community. The parade ground for instance, lined with palms representing 'soldiers on parade', has proven to be very popular, as have the embedded historical text plates in the footpaths and park areas.

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[1] voices in London funny voices in the UK- why you don't change an interview.

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