

Hear O'Washington

The WSJHS Oral History Program's How-To Guide for Running an Oral History Program at your Organization

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Introduction + Why Oral History?

Introduction

The Washington State Jewish Historical Society has been organizing around oral history collection since its inception as the Seattle Jewish Archives Project in 1968. At that time, a group of dedicated volunteers began recording Jewish voices and archiving them with UW Special Collections. Today that collection has grown to hundreds of stories, a non-profit organization of our own, a new database to organize our materials, and a new website to showcase them.

We are so proud of all that we've accomplished, and we want to share back the knowledge we've accumulated with other small organizations who wish to pursue similar initiatives. We hope that this guide proves itself helpful to others who want to preserve their community's stories well into the future.

The Washington State Jewish Historical Society's mission is to preserve and present the history of Jewish life in Washington State. The Society fosters awareness and appreciation of the experiences, the diverse culture, and the significant contributions of Jews, past and present. We build bridges with communities by sharing the stories of our collective histories and serving as an educational resource.

Through its Oral History Program, WSJHS seeks to collect and preserve the diverse stories of Jewish life and culture in Washington State. The goal of the Oral History Program is to create an effective, adaptable model that can inspire other institutions to establish similar initiatives. Oral history allows us to listen to voices from our collective past, offering profound insights into identity, culture, and history. By documenting and preserving a wide range of Jewish stories, WSJHS enriches collective memory while addressing gaps in traditional historical records.

Why Oral History?

Definition and History

Oral History is a field of study as well as a method of collecting historical information. Oral history interviews gather first-person accounts of historical periods and particular events. Oral histories provide rich accounts of the past that no other method of collection can achieve.

Oral histories were originally captured with tape recorders in the 1940s, but the tradition of communities relaying their values and histories through oral transmission is an ancient practice!

Process

Oral history interviews consist of a well-prepared interviewer questioning a narrator and recording the exchange in audio or digital format. Recordings are transcribed, summarized, and indexed before being archived in libraries and special collections.

Transcription is a written representation of the interview, a word for word account of the conversation that was recorded. Transcripts are useful for future researchers to read and review and can be searchable by keyword.

Indexing is the process of organizing data or information in a way that makes it faster and easier to find.

Types of Oral Histories

There are various types of oral histories that can be collected. **Life histories** are interviews about a narrator's personal experience from childhood to the present. **Topical histories** are about certain events, periods, or issues that a narrator can speak to. **Site or artifact specific histories** record a narrator's knowledge about a certain place or thing.

Program Structure

Staff Roles

Oral Historian is the cornerstone of the program, responsible for developing and shaping its overall vision. They develop program initiatives, collect oral histories, train volunteers and bottom-line educational efforts.

Digital Curator focuses on the presentation and accessibility of oral history materials for public engagement. They create digital exhibits and manage the program's web presence.

Program Coordinator is the organizational hub, ensuring seamless communication between teams, committees and external stakeholders.

Digital Archives Manager is responsible for the long-term preservation and organization of oral history recordings and related materials.

Volunteers and Contractors

Volunteers and contractors are recruited as needed to support tasks such as oral history collection, transcription, exhibition research, and event assistance.

Collaborative Committees

The Oral History Advisory Committee is a volunteer-based committee which provides guidance to the program. Members bring a diverse range of expertise and experience and are looped in as needed and in quarterly meetings for advice and support.

At WSJHS we are grateful to our Jewish Archives and Research Committee, who support the goals of the program through oral history collection and transcription and archival support. Research local research groups and volunteer committees who may be relevant to your mission!

Ethics and Best Practices

Museums and historical institutions inherit a history of unethical collecting practices, from colonial exploitation to cultural appropriation.

Everyone involved in oral history work, from interviewers and narrators to archivists and researchers, become part of a web of mutual responsibility working to ensure that the narrator's perspective, dignity, privacy, and safety are respected.

Informed Consent

Informed consent in oral history means that participants clearly understand the purpose, process, and potential use of their interview before agreeing to take part. It ensures they know their rights, including withdrawing or setting conditions for access and use. This consent must be given voluntarily, based on full and transparent information.

Restrictions Process

Once an oral history recording is created, it becomes a historical artifact, and as such, it is important that the recording remains intact. However, we recognize that some recordings may contain sensitive material that could have real-world implications for participants. To ensure the well-being of those involved, we offer the option to impose restrictions on certain sections of the interview. Restrictions allow narrators to designate parts of their interview to be withheld from public access for a specified period.

Interview Experience

They should thoughtfully plan their interview strategies, including selecting appropriate topics, determining whether an interpreter is needed, carefully phrasing questions, and more.

The aim is to treat each narrator with fairness and empathy, striving to create a respectful and supportive interview environment.

Harm Reduction

Throughout the process, interviewers will work to minimize any potential harm to the narrator, ensuring that the narrator understands their right to decline any questions and that they feel safe sharing their experiences honestly. Interviewers can be trained in harm reduction techniques and equipped with strategies and language to foster a supportive atmosphere, maintain trust, and address competing interests in a fair and impartial manner.

Narrators should be offered copies of their recordings and transcripts, as well as the opportunity to request restrictions on content they wish to keep private.

Collection Process

Curation Development

It is crucial to develop a strategic plan for collection which considers future programming, current events, diversification efforts, grant requirements, and the current orientation of the organization. Curation plans will be met with unforeseen opportunities! It is best to develop a balanced approach which can absorb exciting new opportunities while remaining steady on a planned course. Your oral history program can create a yearly “curation plan” which is returned to and reviewed at critical benchmarks. This kind of planning and review will create a feedback loop which teaches you what you are capable of and what kind of adjustments you might make for next year.

Outreach

There are many ways to connect with potential narrators. You may meet prospective narrators at community events where you have set up an outreach table for your program, or you may call them on their home line because you have a personal connection. The full range of outreach opportunities are at your disposal. Your program can develop outreach scripts that ensure that narrators understand the key points required for them to have fully informed consent. In all outreach situations, an interviewer should remain professional.

When a prospective narrator agrees to record an interview, their interviewer should meet with them to discover their interests and needs. It is crucial to gather information about the person ahead of the interview so that your questions can be personalized to the narrator’s unique story and any constraints they may have on the process.

Format Variations

There are many types of oral history recordings to collect, from short-form, subject-based interviews to long-form life stories. Some narrators prefer to discuss certain topics singly, such as their career, or the historic event they witnessed, whereas other narrators will cover a broader range of topics. Other format variations include location: Oral histories can be collected remotely or in person. Interviews can be one-on-one as well as group recordings, in which the interviewer talks with several members of a family, for instance.

Progress Tracking

It is crucial to develop progress tracking methods that will result in clear communication within your organization. We recommend a simple spreadsheet, or the progress trackers offered in the Office 365 suite of applications. Your progress tracker should contain your prospective narrators' names, brief biographical details, brief curatorial purpose, and contact information. Build a tracker that designates responsibility and lays out each step of the process so that progress can be marked linearly and assessed at a glance. If you have volunteer interviewers, have them report back about their progress on a regular basis so that you can keep this tracker up to date.

Interview Best Practices

There is a lot to say about best practices in oral history interviews, and organizations interested in establishing an oral history program will find tons of resources on this subject! Overall, we emphasize preparation, consent, and poise.

Preparation means that interviewers must have a plan for their recording days! They should do research on their narrators and have a plan, and a question list personalized to each interview. They should establish an interview setting that will not be interrupted, and if they are recording remotely, they should support the narrator in establishing the best environment and framing possible.

Consent means that interviewers are responsible for collecting their narrator's consent – We recommend a combined consent and release form signed by both the narrator and the interviewer. Best practice is to additionally request verbal consent at the start of any recording. Consent also includes preparatory conversations about what a narrator does and does not want to talk about, and awareness of those decisions throughout the interview.

Poise includes allowing silence and avoiding interruption, as well as the ability to handle sensitive topics confidently, alternately offering a narrator more space to explore a difficult story or a pause to regroup and move on. Interviewers must manage time confidently and guide the narrator to change pace if necessary.

Recording Equipment and Platforms

At WSJHS, we use a traditional camera and microphone to collect one-on-one interviews in person, but we have also begun to include additional platforms and equipment to meet needs arising primarily from a distance! Our goal is to collect stories from Jewish community members across Washington, so the emphasis on diversifying our geographic reach is mission-based. Consider what your organization's specific collection goals are, and if something beyond a traditional camera and microphone could be helpful.

We recommend:

TheirStory, a web-based platform that assists with the collection, preservation and distribution of audiovisual stories. This platform was designed for recording remote interviews and providing AI-generated rough transcripts and indexing. Remote interviewing creates access for community members who cannot leave their homes, or who live too far away to travel to. It is limited to participants who have computers and internet access, and who have the ability or support to access those resources.

The Story Booth is a WSJHS initiative developed for the purpose of outreach as well as collection. This 3x6 sound-isolating booth can travel to different locations and events to record stories on site, soliciting narrators for short-form and subject-based interviews. This is a way to collect interviews at quantity when travelling away from your organizational home base.

Preservation Strategy

Preservation practices are always changing, and the best practice is to stay up to date with industry standards and make improvements as often as possible. Oral history recordings are precious artifacts that we should treat with care and consideration.

Transcription and Indexing

When an oral history is complete, create a transcription and an index to accompany the recording. Transcripts and indexes allow future curators and constituents alike to search for relevant subjects and keywords!

Metadata Management

Create detailed metadata for all materials to facilitate discoverability and contextual understanding. This includes descriptive, administrative, and technical information to ensure that anyone can easily access and understand the content of your oral history file.

Original to Disk, Copies to Cloud

Upon completion of an interview, whether remote or in person, export the original file to an appropriate external hard drive or server. Upload copies of the original file to at least two cloud-based backups. Ensure that all of your oral histories are backed up in these three locations and develop finding aids such as databases to track this process. Cloud-based backups like **Permanent.org** are available as a subscription.

Database Management

A primary database that stores and catalogues your collection is a critical component of the preservation strategy. For our database, WSJHS has chosen CollectionSpace, an open-source collections management system specifically designed for cultural heritage institutions. Databases are not only an important component of professional archival standards; they allow organizations to store oral histories in a structured manner and track

their progress within the archival process. With each archival record and its associated metadata organized within a database, all content is searchable and easily accessible.

Volunteer Programming

Volunteers can help your oral history program grow exponentially! Reach out to your community to bring them into your program, explaining that this is an opportunity for them to support your organization, but also to develop crucial skills, discover new opportunities and create lasting connections.

Types of Volunteers

Volunteers can assist with collecting oral history interviews if you train them in your processes. They can also assist with transcription editing, archival support, event assistance, and other opportunities defined by your organization.

Supporting Volunteers

It is crucial to support volunteers by creating a positive environment that provides them with value in earnest. Create volunteer appreciation opportunities as well as opportunities to gather volunteer feedback.

Publication and Celebration

Publication Strategies

Sharing the stories you collect is a critical way to honor your participants, celebrate your achievements, and inspire others. As WSJHS oral history material is born digital, our primary publication resource is our website. Digital exhibitions can showcase oral history recordings alongside photographs, documents, and other digitized artifacts that support the story. Other strategies for publication include print publications, publication events, and other creative presentations.

Content Warning Policy

It is standard practice in museums and history institutions to use content warnings when publishing material that may be sensitive for some audiences to consume. A content warning is a written or spoken notice given before presenting certain material, alerting the audience that the content may be sensitive in nature. Your organization can find or create a list of topics that you'd like to include content warnings for.

Celebration Ideas

Ideas for celebrating your collection include panel discussions, interactive exhibitions and contributor recognition. Each of these opportunities for celebration can be met with tools to measure impact by gathering and tracking feedback. Celebration activities should highlight the contributions of volunteers, narrators, and community partners by offering certificates, awards, or small gifts as tokens of gratitude. Celebration activities can be opportunities for further outreach and participation, encouraging attendees to get involved on a deeper level.

Evaluation and Sustainability

Regular evaluation and a clear plan for sustainability will ensure the long-term success of your oral history program. By assessing outcomes and implementing strategies to secure resources and engagement, you can move your program forward and make a lasting impact.

Defining Goals: Identify measurable objectives for your program such as the number of interviews that are conducted, the diversity of the participants, or the level of community engagement. Track qualitative outcomes as you work.

Collecting Feedback: Survey your volunteers, narrators and community members to understand their experiences and gather suggestions on how your program can be improved.

Analyzing Impact: Successful evaluation should analyze how the program has contributed to preserving cultural heritage, educating the public, and fostering community connections. Document evidence or testimonials that illustrate the program's significance.

Reporting Results: Maintain transparency and improve communication by reporting the results of your evaluations. Celebrate your work and share difficulty moments as well to demonstrate your value and ongoing growth.



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