
HOW TO USE ORAL HISTORY

When used properly as a complement to other methodologies, oral sources can contribute significantly to the scope of research associated with a relatively recent topic. There are many facets to oral history, but its true value in research is in adding personal perspectives to the story. In order to be effective, oral history must focus on a *first-person* account of a topic, event, structure or individual. It should not be confused with folklore, however, which are traditional and trans-generation in its makeup. Oral histories are guided interviews focused on a topic within the life experiences of the interviewee. They should also be recorded, preserved (transcriptions are recommended) and readily accessible to the public. As Thomas L. Charlton defined in his book, *Oral History for Texans* (Texas Historical Commission, 1981), oral history is “The recording and preserving of planned interviews with selected persons able to narrate recollected memory and thereby aid the reconstruction of the past.”

Dr. Charlton’s book is no longer in print, but the Texas Historical Commission has reworked the information and compiled it into a publication entitled *Fundamentals of Oral History* (part of the Texas Preservation Guidelines series). The oral history primer provides good basic information on questioning, interviewing, recording, preserving and planning, and includes a bibliography of additional sources and contacts.

Individuals interested in conducting interviews related to World War II will also want to check the following page on the THC website: <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/militarysites/Word/WWIIoralhistory.doc>.

Another good online resource is the web page for the Baylor University Institute for Oral History (http://www.baylor.edu/Oral_History/) which includes basic information through its Workshops on the Web. Of particular note on the Baylor website is the extensive information on transcribing procedures.

Points to Remember When Using Oral History for Marker Applications

- Oral histories should be used only to complement other sources.
- Oral histories are best used for emotions, feelings and associations, as well as for providing leads to other information and sources. They are not considered the best sources for dates and other specific information that can be better documented through standard primary sources, such as deeds, census records, probate records, etc.
- Oral history differs from folklore; interviews must be about an individual’s firsthand knowledge of a topic.
- When used to document a narrative history, oral history information must be thoroughly annotated with the name of the interviewee and interviewer, date of interview, relevance to the topic being researched, and access information.

