



## At-Home History

### Conducting Oral Histories

What is Oral History? According to the Oral History Association, “Oral History is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events”. Many historical organizations record and collect oral histories as a way to document the past and better understand and connect with older generations.

So how can you do oral history at home? Great question!

First, you’ll need to decide who to interview. Make a list! Grandparents, great-grandparents, elderly neighbors, or other older relatives are all great options. You can also have your kids/grandkids interview you! **Just be sure that whoever you’re interviewing gives permission to be recorded before you start.**

Next, gather the following supplies and set them up at your desk/kitchen counter/dining room table/wherever is a good, quiet place to record:

- Pens or pencils
- Notebook or pad of paper
- Computer or laptop
- Tape recorder or an app on your phone or computer that records audio.
- Video camera (if available) – cell phone recording is also great!

Things to consider:

- If you're recording through a phone call, put it on speaker phone and make sure you're in a quiet place to get the best audio quality.
- Many online meeting platforms (ie Zoom, Google Meet, etc.) have a record meeting option. If you're using one of these platforms for your oral history interview be sure to use this option!
- If you can't record the interview, be sure to have your computer handy to take notes as you go!

### **Starting the process:**

Before you start the interview you'll need to consider what questions you want to ask. There are some great resources on the internet to help guide you on what questions to ask. Here are a few links to help get you started:

<https://uiu.edu/resources/archives/oral-history/oral-history-diy.html>

[https://www.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/UCLA-COHR\\_Interviewing-Family-Members.pdf](https://www.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/UCLA-COHR_Interviewing-Family-Members.pdf)

[https://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/70\\_tipsoral.html](https://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/70_tipsoral.html)

### **Start at the beginning.**

Oral history is traditionally linear. Ask your interviewee (the person you or your children are interviewing) what their full name is, and then ask when they were born, and where. Who were their parents? Their siblings? Where did they grow up? Where did they go to school, who were their best friends or their favorite teachers? What was their daily life like when they were kids? This is a good way to get them to start talking about their life story. Once someone begins talking, it's a good rule to let them continue without interruption. This story is about them! Your list of questions can help prompt them, but try not to interrupt if you can help it.

**Don't stick to the script.** Just because you have questions ready to ask doesn't mean you'll get to them all! Sometimes the best stories come from asking the interviewee questions based on what they just said. Listen closely to what your interviewee is saying and build on what they say by asking follow-up questions.

**It's not just about the facts, it's more about the stories.** The where, when, and who questions are important, but even more important are the why, how, and what questions. These help the interviewee talk about their lives in a more reflective way, and give greater details to their stories. History is not just about dates and facts, it's about weaving a narrative to make the past more connected with the present and our futures.

**Make it fun,** especially if you're having your children conduct the interviews with their grandparents or other relatives! Kids can come up with some great questions based on their own life experiences. Having them ask their own questions can help them relate more to their family's history and give them a greater understanding of their relatives' lives growing up.

**Keep notes.** As you or your kids are asking questions and listening to the interviewee, keep notes of important or interesting facts that come up. You can ask follow-up questions about these now or in a later interview.

### **Now what?**

Once you finish recording your interview, look back over the notes you took during the interview. Sit down and talk with your kids/grandkids about their thoughts and takeaways from the interview.

- What did they learn?
- What surprised them most?
- What did they find most interesting?
- Why do they think that oral histories are important?
- Why is it important to record family histories?

Most importantly, have fun with it!

Stay safe and healthy!

From all of us at Historic Cabarrus Association, Inc.