

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Guide

Educating working people on conducting their own oral history interviews, in relationship with the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre's ongoing Oral History Project & Workshop.

8988 Fraserton Ct. #301
Burnaby, BC
V5J 5H8

p. (604) 419 - 0400

info@labourheritagecentre.ca
www.labourheritagecentre.ca



Workshop & Guide Created By: Bailey Garden

About the BC Labour Heritage Centre's Oral History Project

The B.C. Labour Heritage Centre is an independent not-for-profit historical society with charity status, working to preserve and expand the knowledge of the important role of workers in the history of British Columbia. It produces material for a variety of public history projects, and for labour education activities including walking tours, films, lesson plans, and public installations.

To further our goals, we are interviewing people around the province to document their experiences of work and participation in the labour movement. Stories of working for change or about working life are our particular focus. This project is an important one and will create an archive available for future generations.

Unions, union locals, or individuals can use this guidebook to assist in the undertaking of their own oral histories. The guidebook provides a basic introduction to oral history interviews, guiding the reader through the process – including everything needed to know before, during, and after an oral history interview. The Centre is also providing an Oral History Workshop, in which participants will further their understanding of the concepts introduced in this guide.

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

A Guide to Conducting Your Own Oral History Interviews

About the BCLHC Oral History Project	2
Getting Started – Before the Interview	4
The Matter of “Truth”	4
Considering Ethics.....	5
Being Prepared	6
Capturing Stories – During the Interview	8
Technical Considerations	9
Sensitive Topics	9
Sharing Memories – After the Interview	10
Mining for Gold	11
Preserving and Sharing Stories	12
More Resources on Oral History	13

Getting Started: Before the Interview

Oral history interviews are a way of doing valuable research, which anyone is capable of conducting. This method of research is based on the idea that the “every-day person” has something valuable to say, which comes from their own personal experiences.

Oral history involves interviewing subjects who have had experience with the topic you are interested in. You will be recording their stories, and using that information to gain a better understanding of the topic, which may not have been possible otherwise.

Any group of people is likely to find that their members have unique stories and memories that are full of information, which is too valuable to go undocumented.

The Matter of “Truth”

One of the first concerns that many people, including historians, have about oral history is the worry of whether people will tell the “truth”. While it is fair to have these concerns, the matter of “truth” becomes less of a worry when you have a better understanding of the goals of oral history.

Oral history interviews are not meant to match up perfectly with historical records of events. Sometimes, they won’t!

This is because oral history is meant to preserve the memories of people *as they experienced it*, as opposed to how more “traditional” forms of historical research have explained what happened. These experiences may contradict the mainstream narrative (story). This is exactly why they should be captured, as they may give us a different look into a side of history that hasn’t been explored.

This being said, many of us will still struggle with the idea of “truth” when conducting interviews, especially when conflicting stories occur.

Say you were conducting oral history interviews about a certain day in history. (i.e., Labour Day Rally)

While several people you talked to remember the crowds of people as joyful and celebrating, one person you interview distinctly remembers the crowd as aggressive and out-of-control.

Instead of ignoring the contradicting information, you may find that it is much more interesting and valuable to ask yourself *why* these memories were different.

Was the person simply having a bad day? Or was there a bigger reason? Asking these sorts of questions may lead you to uncovering new ideas.

Notes:

Considering Ethics

The most important thing to consider before starting your own oral history project is the ethics of your project. You will be talking to people about their personal lives, and this should be treated with respect.

Depending on the nature of your topic, interviews may range from light and funny stories of the “good old days”, to more serious discussions of political and personal opinions. Each style of interview is equally valuable, but it is hard to predict which one you may have!

For this reason, it is important to treat each interview with the same amount of consideration for *respect* and *privacy*.

Step 1: Consider the Details of the Project

Before conducting any interviews, it is important to spend time thinking about the subjects you are interested in learning more about. Will you be asking people about topics or time periods which may be sensitive? How will you be using the information you gain from these interviews? Are you planning on releasing this information publicly?

Step 2: Create a Release Form

It may sound intimidating at first, but creating a release form is actually one of the easiest ways of ensuring your oral history project remains ethical. It gives the subject details of the project, and allows them to provide what is called “*informed consent*”, by reading and signing the form.

A good release form should include:

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| • The purpose of the project (Why?) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Details of the project (Who, What, Where, When?) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • How the information will be used afterwards | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Multiple options for consenting (ex. Option 1: Full Consent. Option 2: Consent if a Pseudonym is Used.) | <input type="checkbox"/> |

You should always go through the consent form with the individual before starting the interview, to be sure they fully understand, and to answer any questions.

Step 3: Let the Interviewee Know What to Expect

If it is possible, provide examples of questions you will be asking ahead of time. Even if you come up with a few new questions during the actual interview, this will give them an idea of the topics you are interested in.

Don’t worry about answers sounding “rehearsed” – when it comes to distant memories, it is actually better for most people to have a prompt to go from, rather than getting caught off-guard in the moment.

This is also the time to explain to the individual that they are not under any pressure to say anything they feel uncomfortable with. You may suggest that if they feel concerned, it is possible to turn the recorder off for certain questions, or to simply “pass” on an answer.

You should also provide contact information, if you have not already, so that they can be in touch with any further questions or concerns about the interview.

Notes:



Being Prepared

As discussed under “Ethics”, it is important to consider the nature of your subject matter before you begin. Prepare your interviewee well ahead of time, so they can properly consider their participation. If possible, provide a Letter of Contact, and/or a list of potential questions, so that they have something to refer to before you begin.

Another way of being prepared involves doing research ahead of time.

What sort of information can you learn about your interview subject, historical events, or relevant issues that may come up?

It is equally important to remain neutral in your interviewing.

You are entitled to have your opinions on the topic at hand, but try your hardest not to make assumptions or judgements based on information before you get to the interview.

Notes:

Dealing with Equipment: One of the most important tools you will need for an oral history interview is some way to record it. Before you begin, you will need to decide how you will be capturing these stories – will you use video recording, audio recording, or both? Nowadays, most recording devices are digital, which has eliminated the hassle of dealing with bulky tapes and players.

Which Should You Choose?	Audio Recording:	Video Recording:
Pros (+):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheaper – Handheld audio recorders are often much more affordable than video cameras. • Smaller digital files. • Content can be transcribed and used as text-based information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Captures full interview experience – visual information such as body language. • Provides opportunity to produce videos, movies from content. • Can also be transcribed and used as text.
Cons (-):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cannot capture parts of the interview like body language, gestures, environment, etc. • May be hard to understand context of statements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewers/subjects may feel self-conscious of their appearance on video and may be distracted. • Lighting, framing, background, etc. must be considered.

Once you have decided on which method of recording you will use, it is important to test all of your equipment before going to the interview. Make sure you know how to start, pause, and stop the recording, as well as how to gain access to the recording afterwards!

Notes:

Group Interviews: Yay or Nay?

When setting up an interview, you may consider the idea of a group setting. This may be the most logical decision in some cases, and may also make a nervous interviewer or interviewee feel more comfortable in terms of having someone they are familiar with present.

- Group interviews may consist of:
- 1) **Multiple interviewers.**
 - 2) **Multiple interviewees.**
 - 3) **Both 1 and 2.**

Having multiple interviewers or interviewees may provide a better sense of rapport in the interview, and could allow individuals to remind each other of things they may have forgotten otherwise.

However, others may feel uncomfortable truly speaking their mind in a group. There is also an increased chance of people talking over one another with more individuals present.

Ultimately, the decision is unique to each interview, and is yours to make.

Tip: Have everyone introduce themselves on the recording before you begin asking any questions – this will help to reduce confusion, and is crucial in group interviews relying only on audio!

You may also want to limit the size of the group – 7+ people may have trouble ensuring everyone is heard equally.



Capturing Stories: During the Interview

So, you've decided to conduct your first oral history interview!

The big day is here, and you are probably anxious to get started, or maybe feeling nervous about how it will go. Before you leave for the interview, make sure you have these essentials with you:

Some people find it helpful to have physical cues on hand: Photos or memorabilia that help prompt memory. You can bring these cues, or suggest the interviewee bring them.

Oral History Toolbox

- Release Form
- List of Questions
- Recording Device
- Notebook, Pen

Any additional information
(business cards, etc.)



Starting the Interview

An easy way to begin the interview & organize your recordings is to start by stating your name, the name or purpose of the interview, and the name of the individual being interviewed.

You should also note the date of the interview.

(This is Jane Doe, with the LHC, interviewing John History on Dec. 1, 2015).

From there, you can transition into asking your questions.

THE POWER OF SILENCE

One of the most valuable skills you can learn in conducting oral history interviews is the power of silence.

Many of us feel uncomfortable with silence, especially in an interview setting, and may feel tempted to "fill in the blanks" by continuing to speak when it is quiet.

Not only will your interview quality increase (less interruptions), your interviewee may surprise you with what they say next, if you allow them the time to think.

Notes:

Technical Considerations

Whether video or audio recording, take steps to ensure your interview takes place in a quiet place, free from background noise or potential interruptions. It may feel tempting to meet at a neutral place such as a café, restaurant, or even a union hall, but the sounds of conversations, food, drinks, and background noise will all be captured! **Offices, meeting rooms, or homes tend to be the best places to record.** Even houses can be filled with potential background noise – pets, children, and even unexpected guests. However, a home interview may be necessary, depending on your interviewee’s comfort levels and ability to travel.

Before you begin, assess noise levels – can a radio, TV or clock be turned off, or a window closed?

TIPS:

- Avoid “mhhh’s”, “uh-huh’s”, and other “filler language”, as this can interrupt your subject’s storytelling – use body language to communicate that you are listening, by nodding, smiling, and leaning forward.
- Use moments of silence as opportunities to take quick notes – indicate topics of interest, which you may want to return to or expand on by asking more questions later.

Sensitive Topics

<p>“Loaded” Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contain an assumption. <p><i>“So obviously, you were angry?”</i></p>	<p>“Unloaded” Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain neutral; fact-seeking. <p><i>“How did that make you feel?”</i></p>
<p>“Closed” Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow for one or two word answers. <p><i>“Did you like your job?”</i></p>	<p>“Open” Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage expansive answers; Often, take the phrasing of a statement, beginning with “Tell me about...” <p><i>“Tell me about your favourite part of the job.”</i></p>
<p>“Personal” Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answer is specific to the thoughts/feelings of the individual. <p><i>“What were your thoughts on that particular strike?”</i></p>	<p>“General” Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answer is a general summary, does not necessarily reflect views of the individual. <p><i>“What was the overall mood among workers during that strike?”</i></p>

As you begin your oral history interview, you may very quickly find that your subject matter is a sensitive or emotional topic for certain individuals.

Notes:

This may even happen with a question that you assumed to be harmless. To avoid uncomfortable situations as much as possible, it is best to understand the distinctions outlined in the previous table.

People may become emotional in a nostalgic moment, and this is to be expected. Above all else, you want the individual you interview to feel comfortable and at ease with the topics being discussed. If, at any point, you notice the interview heading towards an awkward moment, feel free to offer to “take a break” and turn the recorder off, or suggest the option of skipping the question entirely.

Even with all of this in mind, it is possible that you may ask a question that is sensitive or even emotionally painful to the individual being interviewed. If this happens, gently redirect the conversation elsewhere – **do not push**.

Try your hardest to avoid pressuring your interview subject for information they are hesitant to discuss. As long as you strive to keep the atmosphere casual and comfortable, people will feel at ease in discussing a range of topics with you.

At the end of the interview, thank the individual for participating, and be sure to ask them whether there was any topic discussed they would rather omit, or if they have any other additional comments to include on record.

Sharing Memories: After the Interview

Although performing the interview may have seemed like the most vital part of the oral history process, it is not very helpful or useful unless the information gathered can be shared with others. Once you have completed your oral history interview, it is time to go over what you learned, and decide how you will communicate it.

Notes:

Mining for Gold

An interview summary will serve as a reference from which you can base your final project.

Whether you wish to use the information in a text form for a publication, or to use the audio or video recordings for a podcast, film, or other creative purposes, you will have a way of quickly and easily accessing the relevant section of each interview.

This will also be useful if you will be conducting multiple interviews, as it is necessary to keep the information organized.

Preserving and Sharing Stories

What makes an oral history interview different from other types of interviews is that it is conducted with the intention of documenting information of historical interest.

For this reason, it is important that the interviews you conduct, including any recordings, summaries, and other information gathered is preserved for the long-term in the form of an archive. Your labour group may already have access to an archive that may consent to managing these files, or you may need to contact a public archive to inquire whether it can be submitted.

CREATING A SUMMARY OF YOUR INTERVIEW

STEP ONE: LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN

It is extremely important to listen to your full interview more than once. You want to be sure that you catch every part – off-hand comments are easily missed during the interview process, but may provide valuable information that is of interest.

STEP TWO: PICK OUT KEY PARTS

Review any notes made during the interview. Listen to the interview again from the beginning, with either a pen and paper, or word processor on hand. Make a note of the time as each transition occurs between topics. Include any points of interest for your final oral history project.

STEP THREE: SUMMARIZE

Summarize each section of the interview, based on the points of transition noted earlier. Describe what the interviewee was talking about, but do not include unnecessary details.

STEP FOUR: TRANSCRIBE THE BEST QUOTES

Sometimes, an interviewee will provide such a great answer that you will want to quote it word for word. In this case, it can be helpful to listen to the quote several times, and transcribe (write down) each word as it is said exactly. You should also note the timestamp of the point in the interview where the quote occurs.

Notes:

Creating Your Final Project

Once you have ensured that the information from your oral history interviews will be preserved for the future, you can produce your final project, based on a combination of your original vision and the new knowledge you have gained. You should consider the message you wish to send, as well as your audience, and the wishes of the interviewees themselves. Is this for the general public, or to educate a specific group, such as a union local?

You may choose to simply reference the interviews in an article, book, video, or other publication.

DIGITAL RECORDINGS (AUDIO OR VIDEO):

- FILES SHOULD BE TRANSFERRED FROM THE DEVICE OR MEMORY CARD TO A SERVER AND/OR EXTERNAL HARD-DRIVE (MORE THAN ONE STORAGE DEVICE IS RECOMMENDED)
- FILES SHOULD BE RENAMED TO REFLECT THEIR CONTENTS

(EX. "JANUARY12015_BOBJONES.MP3")
- FILE TYPES MAY NEED TO BE CONVERTED TO ENSURE A SMALLER FILE SIZE

Another option is to take specific clips from your interviews, whether audio or video, and allow your audience to listen to the individuals speak for themselves. Project ideas include podcasts, documentary-style movies, memory walks, and more. The possibilities are endless! How will you share these stories?

The interview summaries you created should also be preserved in digital word documents named to reflect their contents.

Written notes can either be scanned, or transcribed digitally. It is only necessary to preserve these notes if you feel they will be helpful for others to read.

Additional
Notes:

More Resources on Oral History

More Information

The following links are provided by the Michigan State University project, Oral History in the Digital Age:
<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>

Choosing audio or video recording equipment:

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/equipment/>

Ethical and legal issues:

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/legal-issues/>

Transcribing interviews:

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/transcription/>

Organizing and storing materials:

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/cataloging-and-metadata/>

Project outcomes:

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/outcomes/>

Existing Projects

Oral History Projects in Labour History, Roosevelt University:

<http://www2.roosevelt.edu/library/oralhistory/oralhistory.htm>

Themes in Saskatchewan's Labour History, Oral History Centre:

<http://www.oralhistorycentre.ca/fonds/themes-saskatchewans-labour-history>

“Oral histories, labour and feminism in Manitoba” (Podcast) – Talking Radical Radio, Jan. 6th, 2014:

<http://rabble.ca/podcasts/shows/talking-radical-radio/2014/01/oral-histories-labour-and-feminism-manitoba>

“Oral History and the Canadian Labour Movement” – Article, Simon Fraser University:

<http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/viewFile/10515/11357>

Southern Labor Archives: Voices of Labor Oral History Project, Georgia State University:

<http://research.library.gsu.edu/VoicesofLabor>