How to Do Oral History Podcast Series:

Podcast #1: Why Do Oral History?

Hi, I’m Bekka.

And I’m Joe.

I’m Jenni.

And I’m Monica. And we’re here to tell you why we do oral histories.

I have been doing oral histories for six years as part of the National History Day program. I can tell you that these experiences bring people together in many ways. In addition, it is so important for researchers to do this kind of first-hand research and contribute this person’s story to our current historical record.

It does not require a lot of experience or equipment to do an oral history, so anyone can do it—from amateur historians to students to academic historians. Oral history requires that you think about other times and places, ask important questions, and then analyze how that person’s story intersects with or enhances what you already know about a certain topic or time period.

So, why should we do oral histories?

**Oral histories are the REAL stories of REAL people that sometimes don’t come across in a textbook or history book.**

You as the oral historian will not only hear what the person was telling you, but also observe how they were saying it. You can read in a textbook that life was really difficult during the Depression, but it is not the same as the emotion you feel during an interview.

**Oral history allows us to capture the voices of people who are often left out of historical accounts.**

**Oral history allows us to preserve our stories.**

Very few of us in today’s society write letters or write in a diary. Our communication is instantaneous and disposable, so we will have very few written documents that will inform future generations about what our daily life is like. How often do you print your emails or your texts?
Oral history builds a sense of community and bridges the gap between generations.

Oral history projects help teach students important social skills AND also address state and national education standards related to historical thinking.

Now that you know why we do oral histories, let’s look at the specific components of an oral history project.

What is Oral History?

Oral history is primary source material collected in an interview with someone who participated in or witnessed an event or a way of life. It’s done for the purpose of preserving the information and making it available to others.

There are eight key elements of oral histories:

- Careful attention to copyright.
- A structured, well-researched interview format.
- Thoughtfully written questions, and follow-up questions, that ask for additional detail.
- A controlled and recorded interview setting.
- Collection of first-hand information that goes beyond the current historical record.
- Use of high-quality recording equipment.
- Careful processing of the materials.
- Making the oral history available to others through a local repository.

This series of podcasts will address each of these eight elements of oral history, and take you through the steps of the oral history process.

Good luck with your project. Goodbye!