

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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Starting an Oral History Project

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As the United States Semiquincentennial approaches, communities are planning projects to commemorate and celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Along with those plans comes consideration of how to preserve the stories of individuals, organizations, and local communities. One of the ways to do that is through oral history projects.



Indiana Service Men's Center (Indiana Historical Society)

Oral history projects allow participants to share personal experiences and recollections, which can be recorded or documented through an interview. Oral history projects are complex and require significant planning and preparation. There are topics to choose, relationships to build, interviewees to identify, and training to arrange for.

Tips for planning oral history projects:

- Start building relationships with potential interviewees. People are often more comfortable if they know and trust the interviewer as well as the organization implementing the project.
- Interviewees are often more open to being interviewed by people who can understand their experiences. For example, a Korean War veteran may be most comfortable talking to another Korean War veteran.
- Gather memory prompts or ask interviewees to bring their own. A photograph or an object may surface memories and stories.
- Keep the interview focused on the topic but recognize when digressions are helpful and important.
- Many oral history projects focus on gathering the memories of older people, asking them what it was like to grow up in the community. Think about including younger interviewees and asking questions about life in the present day.
- Understand that people will be talking about all kinds of things – happy, sad, traumatizing – and be sure to create space for emotions.

Consider these questions before starting an oral history project:

- What is the oral history project about?
- Who is managing the project?
- What training do you need?
- Who should conduct the interviews?
- What is your timeline?
- What materials do you need?
- What are the costs of the project, and how will it be funded?
- What do you want to know?
- What will you do with the information?
- Who will you interview?
- How will the questions be developed?
- How will you record the information?
- Do you have plans to transcribe the interviews?
- Will you allow restrictions? Delayed release? Access limitations?
- What forms do you need? For interviewees? For interviewers? To request access?
- How will information be stored, and will you make the information available to the public?

Resources

- [How to Conduct an Oral History Interview](#) (National Trust for Historic Preservation)
- [How to Do Oral History](#) (Smithsonian Institution Archives)
- [Oral History Best Practices](#) (Oral History Association)

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Disaster Assistance](#) (Northeast Document Conservation Center)
- [Disaster Planning and Response](#) (American Association for Local History)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Collection Trainings

[The Florence Price Archives: A Case Study](#)

May 7 (Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts)

Recorded Webinars

- [Indiana Historical Society](#)
- [Texas Historical Commission](#)

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