Introduction to Oral History:
Interviewing & Recording for the Newfane Community Memory Project

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Vermont Folklife Center

Vermont Folklife Center
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Group Introductions

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Who We Are:

- Independent 501c3 founded in 1984
- Based in Middlebury, Vermont
- Cultural Research and Education Organization

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What We Do:

- Document, sustain and present the diverse cultures of Vermont and the surrounding regions
  - Interview-based, ethnographic research
  - Exhibitions and Collaborative media production
  - Multi-media Archive
  - Education outreach in schools and professional learning opportunities for educators

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Why We Do It:

- To make Vermonters *visible* to one another
- To sustain *living* cultural practices and expressions
- To build *resilient* cultural communities
- To understand how people make the past useful in the present

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What we're doing today:

- Introducing the Community Memory Project
- Talking about the basic concepts of Oral History and discussing best practices for doing an Oral History project
- Learning about the interview process
  - → How to approach someone for an interview
  - → Preparing and planning for an interview
  - → The art of interviewing
  - → How to record an interview
- Watching a model interview
- Final questions and inspiration!

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Upcoming Workshops:

- **Oct 17: Using the Project Website (1-3 PM)**: Participants will learn how to upload audio files, transcripts, and images to the Community Memory website.
- **Oct 24: Photography and Scanning (1-5 PM):** How to create digital copies of physical objects, using a scanner (for photographs, journals, letters and other flat things) and a digital camera to capture images of three-dimensional things (like human beings and objects that are important to people). Hands-on practice and try out the equipment.
- **Oct 31: Audio Editing Basics (1-3 PM):** A hands-on introduction to basic audio editing for anyone looking to create interview-based audio content, from simple cuts and excerpts to the core skills needed to build a longer-format podcast. Participants will learn to trim, cut, assemble and mix a simple audio piece using free, web-based editing software.

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Takeaways from today:

- Learn about the project
- Explore ways that you might want to participate
- Identify what you need to take next steps. We are here to support you!

Introduction to VFC approach to Oral History

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Fundamentals of ethnography:

- Rooted in Anthropological practice
- Process through which the researcher tries to **understand experience from the perspective of the person to which the experience belongs**
  - → Documentation
  - → Interviewing/Participant Observation
  - → Reflection
  - → Representation

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Fundamentals of ethnography:

- Our practice rooted in:
  - Collaboration, participation and reciprocity
  - Co-production of knowledge with communities
  - Interpretive authority lies with communities/individuals with whom we work

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Oral history as ethnographic method:

- "History is the past made useful in the present"
- Objective Truth versus Personal Truth
- Memory and the construction of the past
- Everyone is expert in their own experience
- Collective memory and shared experience

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Other characteristics of Oral History

- An oral history is the full, unedited audio record
- An oral history/ethnographic interview is not scripted; the interviewer usually does not bring a prepared list of questions. The interviewer may bring areas of inquiry, but also may not.
- Interviews can address the past, present and future

Oral History in Practice

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Community Memory Project - Brainstorm:

- What do you want to learn?
  - This will help you have a better idea who you want to approach, and why

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How to approach interviewees

- By letter, email or phone call always explain:
  - Who you are
  - What you're interested in
  - That there are no pre-scripted questions (but you might give them an idea why you're approaching them in particular and some specific things you might like to hear about)
  - What you can offer the interviewee (a copy of the interview e.g.)
  - That the interview will be conducted in the safest manner possible (following pandemic safety protocols - remote vs. in-person)
  - How long you expect the interview to take (30 min is short - allow at least 1 hr)
  - If you are planning on taking photos - ask permission ahead of time
  - Where the recording will end up (with their permission)
    - Mention the archive and release form

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Using a release form

- Why use one
- What does the release agreement really mean?
- How to introduce them to your interviewee

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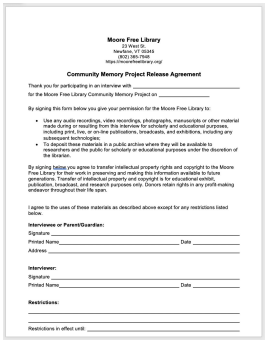

Moore Free Library
23 West St.
Nwrkbow, VT 05648
(802) 365-7644
https://moorefreelibrary.org/

Community Memory Project Release Agreement

Thank you for participating in an interview with _____
for the Moore Free Library Community Memory Project on _____

By signing this form below you give your permission for the Moore Free Library to:

- Use any audio recordings, video recordings, photographs, manuscripts or other material made during or resulting from this interview for scholarly and educational purposes, including print, live, or on-line publications, broadcasts, and exhibitions, including any subsequent technologies;
- To deposit these materials in a public archive where they will be available to researchers and the public for scholarly or educational purposes under the discretion of the librarian.

By signing below you agree to transfer intellectual property rights and copyright to the Moore Free Library for their work in preserving and making this information available to future generations. Transfer of intellectual property and copyright is for educational exhibit, publication, broadcast, and research purposes only. Donors retain rights in any profit-making endeavor throughout their life span.

I agree to the uses of these materials as described above except for any restrictions listed below.

Interviewee or Parent/Guardian:
Signature _____
Printed Name_____ Date _____
Address _____

Interviewer:
Signature _____
Printed Name_____ Date _____

Restrictions:
_____
_____
Restrictions in effect until: _____

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Signature _____

Printed Name _____ Date _____

Address _____

_____

Interviewer:

Signature _____

Printed Name _____ Date _____

Restrictions:

Restrictions in effect until:

Listening Exercise

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Interviewing Fundamentals:

- It's a conversation!
- It's a lot of work!
- *They* are the the expert

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Interviewing – It's a conversation!:

- Skills you need to do a great interview and the skills you employ every day when talking to people:
  - Listening
  - Reflecting on what you hear
  - Asking follow up questions
  - Eye contact
  - Body Language

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Interviewing – It's a lot of work!:

- Turn taking suppressed
- Engaged listening
- Power and positionality
- Active questioning
- Heightened awareness of interaction
- Importance of silence

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They **are the experts:**

- **The** bottom line of the interview

Open-ended questions allow people to speak from their expertise. Open-ended questions:

- Can't be answered by a 'yes' or 'no'
- Presume nothing - an authentic inquiry
- Are fail-proof (anyone can find a way to answer/succeed)
- May not sound like a question ('Tell me about…")

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Interviewing – Practical tips:

These may vary depending on whether you're conducting the interview remotely, via tape-sync or in-person within your household. We will go over the specifics in the "recording technology" segment of this presentation.

- Before:
  - Get a sense of interviewee
  - Make initial contact
  - Check equipment/software ahead of time
  - Prepare release forms

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Interviewing – Immediately Prior to beginning:

- Set up and test equipment/listen to the space
- Make sure interviewee is physically comfortable
- Review release form
- Explain procedure and consent
- Position yourself so that you can maintain eye contact
- Notify interviewee before you start recording
- (If using digital recorder) check and set recording levels
- "Slate" recording (record an Audio ID)

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Interviewing – During:

- (If using digital recorder) periodically check recording levels
- Monitor recording through headphones
- Maintain eye contact
- Listen Actively/respect silence
- Use body language
- Last question: "Is there anything else you'd like to say?"
- If you want to edit content:
  - Potently ask interviewee retell
  - Gather room tone

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Interviewing – Immediately after:

- Share release form once again
- Ask if/how they would like to receive their copy of the recording
- Make sure you have their contact information
- …say thank you!

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Interviewing – Once you get home:

- Send thank you note/follow up phone call
- "Process" interview
- Make copy of interview and send to interviewee

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Community Memory Project:

- After the interview
  - Send thank you note/follow-up call
  - Transferring, uploading and backing up audio
- Next steps:
  - Using project website
  - Notes and metadata
  - Transcripts and logging
  - Audio editing

You can be involved with each of these steps, or NOT, as you choose!

Break Time!

Recording Technology

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Interviewing – Technological mediation:

- **Recording** the interview central to oral history
- Technology **fundamental** to recording

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Interviewing – Technological mediation:

- Recording technology offers amazing opportunities
- Recording technology brings logistical challenges
- Recording technology can create barriers
- Recording technology carries great responsibility

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Audio recording – Techniques:

The **Goal** of field recording (as far as we're concerned at least) is to make the best recordings you can with the equipment available to you.

However, we also take another perspective on this stuff:

If you are creating recordings that you intend to save for use by yourself and others in the future, you have responsibility to use the best quality equipment you can, and to know how to use it well.

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Technology – Remote or In Person? :

For the Community Memory Project - 4 options:

With a digital recorder and microphone:

1. In-person recording
2. "Tape-sync" (Interview conducted remotely over the phone; interviewee recorded on a digital recorder.)
3. Solo recording - use a digital recorder to record narration/stories individually
4. Use Zoom

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In person recording and COVID-19 :

- Due to the pandemic the Vermont Folklife Center is **not** conducting in person interviews for the foreseeable future.
- In line with recommendations from the Oral History Association **we do not advise** anyone to conduct in person interviews with people outside their own household at this time.
  - www.oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/

1. Using Digital Recorders - In-Person, Solo, Tape Sync

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Audio recording – Digital audio basics:

- We will be creating WAV files.
- Two main elements of WAV audio to be aware of…
  - **Sampling rate**
  - **Bit depth**

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Audio recording – Techniques:

Recording Chain

- Microphone
- Cable
- Digital Audio Recorder
- Headphones

Flash Memory Recorders – **TASCAM DR-40X**

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Audio recording – Techniques:

Microphone Placement

- Optimum mic distance depends greatly on the particular microphone being used.
- That stated, for most mics, a good, standard distance to begin with is approximately 4” to 6” from the speaker’s mouth.
- Consider using a boom-arm floor stand—it will allow for effective miking under a variety of conditions.

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Audio recording – Techniques:

Recording Levels

- The **level meter** tells you the actual intensity of the sound you have recorded (i.e. input); also known as VU (volume unit) meter.
- Zero is the point of **"clipping"**—where distortion occurs; this is 0dB on many meters.
- **Digital recording is not forgiving**—treat a few steps below zero as the clipping point & don't go below that.

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Audio recording – Techniques:

Monitoring

- Monitoring recording will let you in on what your mic is picking up
- It is important to monitor recordings—a least at the beginning and periodically throughout
- Two monitoring methods: headphones and level meter. **Remember: they serve different purposes!**

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Audio recording – EZ Rules:

- Record in standard, uncompressed formats—such as WAV—only.
- Record at a minimum of **16 bit/44.1 kHz mono** for interview recording
- Always use an external microphone
- Always use headphones—at least at the beginning—to be sure the recording is turning out well.
- Pay attention to recording levels!

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Technology Practice

Recording an Audio ID - an oral "tag" on an audio or video recording with information that will also be preserved as written metadata

- Identify yourself
- Date
- Location
- Project
- Interviewee
- Relationship to interviewee
- Ask interviewee to introduce themselves (spell names if needed)

This is Mary Wesley and it's Saturday, October 3, 2020. I'm in Cyberspace, Vermont with Johnny Appleseed and I'm with the Vermont Folklife Center, interviewing for our *Listening in Place* Project. Johnny is a friend of my Uncle Jack. Johnny, could you introduce yourself, say and spell your full name please?

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Other options: Recording with a Smartphone

- Figure out which app you'll use for recording:
  - iPhone: Voice Memo app (built-in) or Voice Record Pro
  - Android: Easy Voice Recorder
- Find out where the microphones are on your phone (usually near the bottom), keep clear when recording
- Make some test recordings first
  - You can't monitor your audio on a smartphone. Record and listen back to a test recording first and assess for quality control.

2. Solo Recording

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Solo Recording

- Find a quiet space to record.
- If using the digital recorder, set up a mic stand to record yourself; holding the mic in your hand can result in handling noise and inconsistent recording levels

3. Remote interviewing: Tape-sync

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Tape-sync

- If possible, schedule a pre-interview phone call to go over the equipment set-up with your interviewee.
- Encourage your interviewee to set up in the quietest place possible.
- If you're able, you can record your end of the conversation as well, but it's not necessary.

4. Remote interviewing: Zoom

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How to record on Zoom

- The person recording must be the "host" or "co-host."
- When you're ready to record, press the "Record" button in the bottom toolbar. Two options for where the recording is saved:
  - "Record on this Computer" - File will save to the local hard drive on your computer. Zoom automatically creates a folder titled "Zoom" and stores recordings there.
  - "Record to the Cloud" - Post-recording file will be emailed to administrator when it's finished recording. It can also be accessed for 30 days from the admin dashboard and then will **automatically be deleted**.
- After recording the audio ID and introductions it's advisable to mute yourself while the interviewee is speaking.
- When recording you may use the pause button in the bottom toolbar if needed. When you're ready to stop there recording click the square, "Stop" button.
- Let the interviewee know when you stop recording.
- Be sure to download/transfer the recording to wherever you're storing it and upload it to the project website as soon as possible

After the interview - File Management

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Saving Your Audio:

- *Describing your recordings*: metadata, file naming, logs/transcripts
- *Storing your recordings:* local and remote backup

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Describing your recordings – Metadata

- Who, what, when and where
- Intellectual content
- Permissions
- …or, in other terms, information **about** the files you've created and their **content.**

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Describing your recordings – file naming:

- **In the context of oral history preservation, a file name needs to do two things:**
  - Provide a unique identifier for each file.
  - Provide enough information so that the content of the file can be identified from the name.

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Describing your recordings – file naming:

- **Some examples of file names:**

  smith-jane_2019-10-31_audio001.wav
  smith-jane_2019-10-31_image001.tif
  smith-jane_2019-10-31_image002.tif
  smith-jane_2019-10-31_image003.tif
  smith-jane_2019-10-31_transcript001.doc

- **Resource on file naming for oral history:**
  - http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/08/file-naming-in-the-digital-age/

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Describing your recordings – Logs and transcripts:

- Transcript is just a representation of what happened in interview
- VERY helpful when editing...
- Transcripts, access and *accessibility*
- Takes time or $$$
- Online services (e.g. Trint) can be helpful and cheaper than human transcription - however, be mindful of confidentiality.

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Storing your recordings:

- "LOCKSS" (Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe)
- Store in multiple places off line (external drives, server)
- Cloud services (DropBox, Google Drive, others) - but mind confidentiality!

Thanks!

Presentation developed by Kathleen Haughey, Andy Kolovos & Mary Wesley of the Vermont Folklife Center. Audio recording and preservation sections developed by Andy Kolovos and John Fenn of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

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