

Gathering Oral History On Route 66: A Manual

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for the

National Park Service
Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program



"Camp, twelve miles west of Gallup, NM. Also first rabbit breakfast, 1921." Benotson Collection, National Park Service, Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program.

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Preface

According to research in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (May 2002), America's children are not learning history effectively: only 43% of 12th graders surveyed had a basic understanding of U.S. history. Yet public interest in America's oral heritage is increasing, in and out of schools. The past is expressed in our memories, waiting there to be documented.

One crucial part of America's oral history is Route 66, a history less abstract and more locally grounded than many other aspects of our nation's past – ideal for training citizen-historians in collecting oral history. Oral history as a method of recording history is well documented, with standard procedures codified by the Oral History Association and presented in Dunaway & Baum's *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1996.) Citizen-historians benefit from training in oral history by learning how to conduct well-researched and properly recorded interviews. They return this information to their communities through pamphlets, documentaries in radio and television, museum exhibits, web sites, CD-ROMS, and theatre.

Oral history is not limited to professionals. Anyone can do it, with proper preparation and training. This manual is designed to help the non-professional form a skilled team of people committed to Route 66 and its living history, and thus to organize an oral history project. There are many other fine resources that you might want to consult as well, to answer specific questions, or even just to better your understanding of oral history. A list of some of these resources is provided in Appendix A: References and Additional Reading.

We'll begin our guide with an overview of the process of oral history. By the time you finish this manual, you'll have read about organizing a project, interviewing, making a professional-sounding recording, and using these recordings in exhibits and events. Chapter One discusses designing, organizing, recording, and interviewing. Chapter Two explores how to research and provide context for your interviews, and how to frame questions for your project. Chapter Three takes up archiving and using oral history in exhibits, pamphlets, broadcasts, community presentations, and education.

The Process of Oral History

Though oral history might seem like a relatively new idea, scholars have tracked down references to this process in the writings of the Greek historian Thucydides. When writing his history of the Peloponnesian Wars over 2,000 years ago, he ran into some of the same problems you will: he complained that, try as he might, every story collected told history differently!

In North America, probably the first oral history project was run by a Franciscan friar called Sahagun, in California. He wanted to understand the ancient days of Mexico, and gathered Indians together for a history-telling session. That was in 1558.

There's a distinction between oral tradition and oral history, though. **Oral tradition** is our folklore: the stories, legends, songs, and jokes people tell about the past. Whether someone can verify the story and tie it to a particular time and place is less important than whether it's a good story: it's the lore of our communities. **Oral history**, defined as the recorded reminiscences of eyewitnesses to historically significant events or trends, is driven by fact – the spoken memories of an individual's life, community, politics, and places.

Today, the written records of history seem to be vanishing. E-mails have replaced letters; phone calls have replaced memos. We aren't the letter-writers and journal-keepers we once were. So, much of the raw material of history is passed on orally – told and heard.

And even when written records are abundant, they often don't tell the whole story. Oral history is excellent for filling these holes in history, particularly for those with limited education, or from groups who live outside of written culture, or in illegal or underground cultures. It is also useful for those who, for various reasons, can't always commit their dealings to print, such as lawyers, politicians, and so on. Oral history records the experiences of those whose lives and cultures traditionally have been ignored by historians, such as the Hispanic-, Native-, Asian-, and African-American communities. These communities told history for many years; they didn't necessarily write it down. All that is beginning to change.

So oral history is a way of filling in the feelings and observations behind the written records, exposing contradictions in the historical record, and most importantly, spreading a sense of historical-mindedness across a community. Oral history is about situating ourselves in the flow of history from past to future, and listening to people who have lived that history.

But it's not as simple as it sounds: a good oral history interview requires preparation, research, and a systematic interview approach. You not only have to know how your recording gear works, you also have to recognize that oral history is susceptible to individual bias, errors in human memory, and even what the social sciences call the "halo effect." Here, interviewers can't contain their enthusiasm for the subject, and push narrators to remember things they really don't quite recall.

Overview

The process of oral history begins with planning a project: deciding what you, as a community, want to know and where you might find it. Oral history is not just a matter of going up to the oldest person on the street and asking a few questions. That's what causes some researchers to dismiss oral historians as people confused between the tape recorder and the vacuum cleaner – scooping up random fragments of the past rather than collecting useful history, from informed people, on targeted topics. As a rule, it's far better to do a few good interviews than many poor ones. And good interviews require research into the historical period you're trying to understand, to provide a context for individual recollections.

After doing your research, screening possible interviewees, and prioritizing topics, you and your group will frame a set of questions and figure out who can answer them best. Next, you will need to figure out how that new tape recorder or video cam works, and practice with it until you can just about operate it in your sleep. Finally, you'll begin making arrangements, setting up times and (quiet) places for the interviews. Only then does the recording and interviewing start.

The fun really begins when the recorder is turned off (and after you've labeled the recordings right away, so as not to record over them or confuse them with others). Recording and interviewing are only half the job.

The next steps are archiving and using the oral history you've collected, whether that's in community pageants, community theatre, teaching in the schools and college, or broadcasting on radio or television. For all these purposes, you'll need a transcript, or at least an interview catalog, which allows people to quickly find the interview's contents. People listening to your recording or reading your transcript will want to know the specifics of that interview, so you'll fill out an interview sheet to give later users an idea of what happened in the interview.

Oral history must be deposited (with the transcript and a backup copy of the tape) in an archive that's open to the public. It's not oral history until you've taken the final steps to return it to the community and make it accessible by cataloging and summarizing the interview's contents. That's another reason why a few good interviews are better than many lesser-quality ones: the fewer interviews you do, the more thoroughly you can process and make them accessible to the public. We don't want to steal people's history: we want to share it. As people look through the transcripts and listen to the tapes, they'll be inspired to share their own recollections of "America's Mother Road," Route 66.

Chapter One: Designing, Organizing, and Interviewing

Starting an oral history project is an act of faith: in yourself, in your community, in Route 66. It's community-building, and economic development; it encourages continued interest in the world around you and a connection between generations, between the past and the present.

In high school, education in history is mandatory, but community history is all voluntary. Yet everybody seems stretched thin in their volunteer time. To bring people in to volunteer for history projects, we have to start with something critical to a community, to its identity. A successful community history project grows from the shared roots of a community – its beloved people and places. It brings all these together, grounding the present-day community in the rich context of its past.

Now, before we address the how-to's of doing oral history, let's think about Route 66: what it means to people, what we know about it, and what we want to know about it.

Issues in Interviewing About Route 66

What is Route 66? A stretch of asphalt, largely decommissioned? A slower lifestyle, now largely past? A place where we work and play today, as well as yesterday? A collection of artifacts and memories? Route 66 is many different things to many different people, and it's sometimes hard to know where to begin asking questions. How is an interviewer to know what's *most* important?

One way to find out is by working through priorities identified by your organization and oral history committee members, for when knowledgeable local people identify the gaps in their community's recorded history, the best oral history can follow. Yet, as always when conducting interviews, new information may surface that causes the interviewer to re-evaluate or re-prioritize topics. This is often beneficial: historical research is rather like peeling an onion, in that you expose deeper, previously unseen layers as you work.

In practical terms, the earlier the period you're investigating, the fewer there are who can provide historical testimony about it. That's why many organizations are focusing their efforts on the first epoch of Route 66: the period of planning and building the road, and its first passengers and commerce. On the other hand, some oral historians will want to have a topical focus, centering their interviews on a particular person or event, such as the Bunion Derby (the great

First International Continental Foot Race along Route 66 in 1928). Each community must set its own priorities, but it's a good idea to consider factors such as this to ensure a thorough historical understanding of America's Mother Road.

Do we talk about Route 66 as the past or the present, or as both? The purpose of historical interviewing is to fill gaps in the record. That gas station on the edge of town may be perceived only as an abandoned hulk, until it is imbued with meaning by someone who remembers its past – and that's the justification for doing oral history. But when we sit down to interview about Route 66, are we looking at the subject from the perspective of someone who lived it decades earlier, or from the perspective of someone investigating it today, based on their readings and other research? In practice, our frame of reference is a mix of these two time periods, and it can be helpful to an interviewer to remember that the person they're speaking with knows Route 66 from direct experience. To collect the best, sharpest memories of an era, we may want to start by asking for historical witnessing – including a visualization of exactly where Route 66 businesses or alignments were – before asking questions that raise interpretations of the meaning of Route 66. In other words, a good interviewer starts with the lay of the land, and saves speculation and analysis of the meaning of Route 66 until the end of the interview, after factual recall is completed. (Later users of the transcript may or may not agree with the interpretations, but they will definitely appreciate the facts and locations an interviewee has presented.)

What is Route 66's history? Is it limited to its physical existence, its various alignments, and structures? Or should we understand Route 66's history as relating to the development of a whole town or city, which probably relied on Route 66 for much of its settlement and commerce? Often, when libraries or archives are asked about their holdings on Route 66, they will respond that they have none. But if one looks in their local history vertical files (files of materials that don't fit in any other category), it often turns out they have hundreds of pages of invaluable information about how Route 66 aided in that town's settlement and development. Route 66 is local history; local history is Route 66 history.

Oral histories can't stand on their own. They need context, which local history societies have already richly documented. But history is more than local history. The construction of Route 66 was fueled by the enthusiasm of early American motorists to increase the areas their automobiles could reach. So to understand the early planning phases of Route 66 history, you must turn to the Good Roads Movement, or the National Trails network of roads. Developments

in local history should be tied to a larger context, which is important for your interviews. Thus, researching Route 66 will lead some into understanding railroad and road-building history, while others will become fascinated by the history of motels and service stations and the people who lived and worked there.

Is Route 66 a local or a national property? The answer, “Both,” seems inevitable. Yet many people see Route 66 exclusively in the context of their own community – that is, how *their* Main Street developed, instead of how *America’s* Main Street developed. The fact is, this is a local, a regional, and a national road, and each aspect deserves exploration in your interviews.

Hitting the Highway: Your Route 66 Project

Now we’re ready to tackle the how-to’s of oral history. This is where the rubber meets the road!

First, you will need an oral history committee to direct and co-ordinate the oral history project and assemble resources such as grants, equipment, and donations – in short, to get the job done. You don’t want a large committee, or you’ll never get the members together; but not a small one, either, or you won’t have the benefit of the ideas and the energy that a committed group of people can generate. Between four and eight members works best.

Select for your committee those who have been active in your organization, and those who may bring resources and skills with them – a local college professor, teacher, librarian, or a member of a local history society. These will support and serve as a recruiting pool to do the hard work of collecting, researching, interviewing, and archiving oral history. Also, a good committee includes volunteers from the different ethnic groups in your community, to make it as broad and representative as possible. Make sure committee members are hard workers with a track record of following through on commitments, because collecting oral history is frequently a multi-year project.

Ideally, your committee will include a project coordinator (or two), who can do the day-to-day work and report back regularly to your oral history advisory board (more on that later).

Next, think about your office. It could be somebody’s back room or garage, or it could be a desk in the local public library. Wherever its location, it needs to be a place that the project coordinator can access easily, where materials can be left out while work is in progress, and where a whiteboard can be mounted to monitor the progress of the oral history project. It should

also be a place where your equipment is protected from moisture, sunlight, and casual borrowers, and it should have space enough for a desk and chairs. If space permits, the office should have two comfortable chairs in a quiet location where interviews can be recorded.

Now, gather your equipment, which will be stored at the office for the use of everyone on the project. The core equipment needed for community oral history might include these items:

1. Recording equipment (cassette, digital recorder, or mini-disc recorder; microphones; tapes or discs; and batteries);
2. A cassette transcriber with foot pedal (which speeds the transcription process threefold);
3. A filing cabinet, preferably locking, where equipment can be kept against dirt and fire;

Now that you have a committee and a place to meet, you should meet soon! The first task of this committee is *not*, as most assume, selecting people to interview. Not yet. The first task is actually to conduct a community-wide inventory or survey to determine what interviews *already* exist in colleges, libraries, schools, or in local history society collections. (That's why it's handy to have representatives from all these groups on your oral history committee.) Once you know what exists, then the committee can select key topics and sub-topics for interviews. What are the most important questions not already answered? What are the most important eras not already covered? Within each era, what topics would you most like your community to know about? Draw up a list of key topics to help you focus your energy and resources. Later, you'll prioritize those topics.

This is also the time to think about how you will pay for your project. Doing oral history costs money, and anticipating costs for the first year or two of the project will cut down on surprises later. The main costs you can plan for are these:

1. Equipment purchase and maintenance. (The more equipment you can borrow, the better – but there will still be costs involved in keeping equipment up and running.)
2. Consumables, such as tapes, discs, paper, toner or ribbons, binders, and other supplies.
3. Office and furniture. (Sometimes an article in your group's newsletter can stimulate donations of office space or equipment.)
4. Small stipends for project coordinators.
5. Transcribing costs (unless your group can find volunteers.)

Almost everyone doing community-based oral history volunteers his or her time. In practice, though, project coordinators are often giving up paying jobs in order to commit their time and energy to the oral history project. That's why many projects provide some token payment – at least \$100 per quarter – for those who are spending 10 hours or more a week in training new volunteers, supervising the processing of the interviews, and tackling other tasks. Figure, too, that it will cost about \$50 to transcribe, edit, and index a one-hour interview, even when the work is done with volunteer labor. Altogether then, you can figure approximately \$200/quarter for basic expenses and a small stipend for those doing the work. All this may add up to anywhere from \$800 to \$1,000 a year. Where can you find these funds?

First, you might want to start an oral history *advisory board*, consisting of prominent members of the community – people who could contribute office supplies and equipment, or perhaps organize a fancy annual dinner to raise a few hundred dollars for the project. Sometimes, interviewees themselves will help cover the costs of transcribing and archiving their materials. But be careful that your contributors are not setting the agenda for your community's oral history project. Your work should be guided by a project plan, not by personal interests.

Another possible source of project funding is your state humanities council. If your group works with a recognized oral historian, a state humanities council will often come up with a few thousand dollars to help you tackle a specific topic and present a public program, such as an exhibit, a public forum on local history, or a local radio or television broadcast. The key is to think backward: decide what kind of events or exhibit you would *like* to have, then seek funds to do it. (Remember that state humanities councils require at least one qualified scholar to be a part of the process, from planning to evaluation.)

To manage your project money, especially if you accept grants and donations, you will need to appoint a fiscal agent or treasurer. The fiscal agent will log income (donations, grants, etc.) and expenditures, file receipts, submit invoices, and if necessary, open a project account and sign checks (which should be pre-authorized by the project director). This person might also be asked to keep track of volunteer hours spent on the project – after all, time is money, too. Good bookkeeping is a must when you accept grants, matching funds, or donations.

Next, your committee should revisit your list of key topics in order to establish priorities. What do you want to know, and how difficult will the information be to find? The basic procedure for organizing oral history interviews is by topic rather than by individual. That

approach helps you screen potential interviewees according to the topics they can address, which allows you to set a priority for certain periods or sub-topics within the larger subject. Without a plan and interviewing priorities, you're like the old hunter who loads his shotgun with birdseed, determined to shoot *something*, no matter what.

At the end of this priorities-setting discussion (which could continue into a second meeting), it's a good idea to select the names of four or five possible interviewees who can address those priorities. Later, we'll talk more about selecting interviewees.

Use your priorities list to create a design sheet like that provided in Appendix B: Sample Oral History Project Design Sheet. A design sheet will help you to schedule and track your interviews, to see that your project is focusing on priorities and covering its topics. It will also allow the project coordinator(s) to monitor the project and track the status of each interview to see if it's being transcribed, how soon the transcription will be finished, if the interviewee's release form is signed and filed, etc.

It will be helpful, too, to track the various organizational functions of your project – committee membership, getting equipment, funding efforts, and so forth – using a form like that shown in Appendix C: Sample Oral History Project Management Sheets.

Finally, once you begin arranging your interviews, you'll want to track their progress and processing using the form in Appendix D: Sample Oral History Interview Processing Sheets.

Preparing for the Interview: People and Context

Now you have an organization and a plan. Next, you need to identify your interviewers and interviewees and prepare for the interview itself.

Who should do the interviewing? Who can best collect the history of a community, insider or outsider? Each has its advantages. Outsiders offer a useful distance, professional training, and experience, but they may bring along their preconceptions and prejudices. Insiders, on the other hand, have lived in the community long enough to know people's names and families and trades; they've watched the acorns turn to oaks. Yet insiders sometimes lack perspective, or they become embroiled in local controversies. In the end, the committee must simply use its collective judgment to pick the best available person for each interview.

Once chosen, the interviewers need to become familiar with their legal and ethical responsibilities before they set to work. You can find excellent guidelines in the Oral History

Association's publication, *Evaluation Guidelines* and its *Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association*, Pamphlet Number 3, (Rev. ed. September 2000) (viewable on the internet).

And who should we interview? In history, we seek not just the articulate, but also the representative. We want the perspectives of young people and old, men and women, different races and ethnicities, and different eras and experiences to be recorded. You're not doing oral history if you're just interviewing a few friends. So when you're selecting your "cast" of interviewees, remember to look for both accuracy and depth of knowledge (the articulate), and social breadth (the representative).

In selecting your interviewees, be choosy. Often, in their urgency to interview senior members of their community, novice oral historians don't take the time to find out what has already been recorded or to set hard priorities for what information is needed. The result may be so many recordings that the person in charge of cataloging or transcribing these interviews is overwhelmed! The result? Unprocessed interviews, their contents unknown, sit unused on a shelf – history "cornered" rather than collected. It's better to do fewer interviews, and shepherd each of them carefully through the entire process. Five well-produced interviews transcribed and deposited where the public can find them are superior to 15 unprocessed interviews gathering dust on a shelf.

So make a select list of interviewees. Just remember, once you're out interviewing, you'll often find there are others you didn't know about who should be interviewed, too. You need to document how you found out about these people, and note where they may (or may not presently) fit into your interviewing plan.

Before interviewing, prepare! You'd no more want to walk into an oral history interview cold than you'd want to walk into a job interview cold. The more you know about your subject and topic, the better your interview will be.

One way to research the interview is by topic. Besides the reference desks at your library on local history, consider learning more about your town or city's special businesses or industry. If your area made bricks, find sources on that history. If it was known for Cozy Dogs, look up the history of the humble hot dog. Tying local history to national trends allows interviewers to understand what's unique to the region, and what is part of a shared American past.

Similarly, do your research on Route 66's history, and you may find places whose experiences mirror your towns. If your local library doesn't have a book you need, they can often

borrow it for you. There are also historical narratives, or contexts about Route 66, and historic Route 66 building surveys, which can be found at each Route 66 state's respective State Historical Preservation Office.

Review the highway's basic chronology – find out what important things were happening along Route 66, and in your area specifically, during the time period you want to cover. Ask the obvious questions. How did this stretch of the road get its name? Who was the Smith that the grocery store was named after? What happened to the people who worked at the malt shop that closed down after the interstate went through? To access history orally, we have to ask the right questions, questions that will caringly and thoughtfully probe and prod sharp memories of the past.

And when I say the past, I mean the *pasts*, because historians could draw different conclusions from the same transcripts. And when I use strong words like “probe” and “prod,” it's because an interview is not a casual conversation, but rather, a directed discussion.

A historical interview is built on preparation, which includes reading previous interviews and boning up on local history. Remember, too, that both the interviewer and the interviewee have taken time from their busy schedules to make a place for recollection to be recorded, cataloged, and deposited. Honor that commitment by arriving prepared, with history in your head and a list of questions in your hand.

The interviewer should take along an interview package, which should include a) a historical outline, for reference; b) a set of photographs or Xeroxed photographs, to prod memories; and c) a list of question areas or topics, and questions for the interview itself.

The historical outline is a brief one or two page summary of the history of your subject. A few members of the oral history committee could take on the task of creating the outline, which could be drawn from a published local history.

Suppose for example, that “road building on Route 66” locally is your priority topic. First, read some books that have historical background on Route 66, such as Quinta Scott's *Route 66*, Michael Wallis' *Route 66: The Mother Road*, or materials on file at your local State Historic Preservation Office, such as state and/or national historical contexts for Route 66. There, for example, you'll find background on the deliberations that designated the highway as Route 66 and not Route 60, the number originally preferred by the Mother Road's organizers.

Whenever possible, photocopy or obtain prints of historic photos of Route 66, and make them part of your interview packet. Your outline-research team may run across historic photos

while examining old books, magazines, interviews, and records. Be sure to keep track of photos that are borrowed or scanned.

Prepare a general list of topic areas and a specific list of questions for your interviewee, but expect new topics and questions to come up as the interview progresses. (It's a good idea to listen to what's being said and add new questions along the way – more on that, later.)

Together, these materials will comprise your interview packet, to jog old memories and stir up stories that otherwise might be missed.

Help your interviewees to prepare, too, by discussing your topics with them and giving them examples of the kinds of questions you'll be asking. A well-planned interview gives the narrator time to hunt photos and to reflect on the key topics on which he or she is particularly knowledgeable.

Equipment Preparation and Recording Environment

Preparation isn't limited to knowing enough about the topic to get your subject to open up – it also means becoming familiar with your equipment. What recording volume on the microphone yields the best results? Where should the microphone be placed to pick up the speaker's words most clearly? How fast does your battery run down? Can you set it all up, properly, in five minutes? Play around at home until you have the answers to these questions - being able to use your equipment confidently can go a long way toward winning your subject's trust. One classic method is to talk to the mike from announced distances ("I'm two feet away from the microphone") and play back the results.

Microphones are an area that deserves a little extra attention. After all, many people feel naturally self-conscious when presented with a microphone – particularly one that's looking right at them! Consider getting a lavalier mike: it clips to the shirt, so you can get it as close to the interviewee as you need to; but it's out of sight, which means that shortly it will be out of mind. Ideally, you will have a stereo recorder – one that records on two channels – and two lavalier microphones, one for you and one for your interviewee, to capture fully the give and take of the interview.

If possible, take along a digital camera for getting snapshots of you and the speakers. These can come in handy later on, for use in articles and exhibits.

And speaking of ideal gear, it's a good idea to have a designated bag, with a checklist, that you keep everything in. Its contents should include spare batteries, an alternative power source such as a power cord, microphones, cables for your microphones, blank recording media, the actual recorder (in good working order), and pens, notebooks, and labels for your notes and labeling. The pen and notebook will be particularly useful for taking notes during the interview. Not only can you make notes about the interview environment, but you'll also be able to write down difficult spellings and dates to help out with the later indexing.

Consider, before you head out the door to your first interview, entering the information that will be on the label – your name and that of your interviewee, and the date – onto your tape or disc. That way, all the information is available to match the recording to its case and notes in the event of separation, without you having to sound overly formal at the beginning of what should be a relaxed interview. Alternatively, you can add this information at the end of the interview, including the narrator's verbal permission to use and deposit the interview.

Your ideal recording environment is a quiet room with a fairly low ceiling, isolated from the rest of the house, without bare walls. Dens and studios are good for this purpose. If your interviewee has a favorite chair, have him or her sit there. Keep your recording equipment discrete when possible and – very important – don't fidget with it. If you get a chance, listen, with your eyes closed, for a minute or so in the room you're considering recording in. This will help you determine if it's a good recording environment.

Don't be in too much of a hurry to start the recording. Getting to know your interviewee before digging into your main topic can go a long way toward building rapport. Chatting informally also gives you time set up your equipment – the setup that works perfectly at home might need some alterations somewhere else. So go ahead and chat, record a test piece, check the playback. This will also help point out any ambient noise problems that might interfere with the recording's quality – household equipment noise in the vicinity, echo from walls or floors, and so forth. When you start for real, wait a few seconds before asking the first question. This gives your ultimate listener an idea of what the room sounds like when no one is speaking.

Good sound is, not to put too fine a point on it, *important*. You want an interview that people can and will want to hear. So keep an eye on your recording levels to make sure they stay consistent; make sure the microphone is well placed; and be as picky about your recording environment as you're allowed to be.

Finally, expect the unexpected. Your interviewee may bring along a friend to help jog his or her memory. Your recorder may decide that, after six months of working perfectly, it doesn't want to start today. Relax – these things happen, and the ability to roll with the unexpected is a valuable trait in field recording. An extra interviewee can add some invaluable detail; that extra time fiddling with the recorder may be just what you need to finish getting acquainted with your interviewee. It's all part of the job.

Now, at last, you're ready to begin your interviews.

Interviewing

An interview is not a conversation, where participants simply chat. The interview is a directed, planned discussion, leading to a product (in this case, a historical record). In principle, the interviewer leads the interaction, prompting the memory with photos and knowledge of the topic, which in turn are enriched by the narrator's recollection of historical details. If the narrator's attention shifts, he or she can be gently called to order with hints such as, "Good. Now let's recall the specifics"

Some wandering is inevitable, but remember that resources are limited and digressions take time away from topics already selected and prioritized. Interviewing senior citizens may pose problems of this kind, for they have so much to recall, they may not realize exactly what you've come to hear, or their attention may shift. Be ready to bring them back to the point, respectfully, as a service to them and to your project. Otherwise, you may drown in material not directly relevant to Route 66. It is helpful, before recording starts, to clearly state or remind the interviewee of the purpose of the project and the planned use of his or her interview materials. It's good practice, too, to prepare the interviewee for the recording session by outlining the topics you plan to discuss.

Begin the interview with basic personal details: the interviewee's name, age, place of birth; education and place of upbringing; memories of Route 66. (See Appendix H for sample beginning questions.) In general, start broadly, with open-ended questions such as, "What's your first memory of Route 66?" Then, move the interview from personal questions to specifics of the place, period, or topic identified before the interview.

A lot of people look for feedback or prompting from their audience when talking. When providing this feedback, do so physically – nod your head, smile, gesture if appropriate, maintain eye contact – rather than verbally. A wrongly-placed “uh huh” on a recording can blot out the narrator’s voice. Don’t be afraid to ask a person to repeat what he or she said, or to clarify a point. The better you understand what your interviewee means, the better your final audience will understand, too.

Working with seniors offers so many rewards, but poses special challenges. Some might be losing memory, or may lack detail on some memories while others stand out in sharp relief. To help them along, set the stage with photographs. Ask them to bring out pictures of their town, or bring your own selected photos of Route 66 for them to view. Photos refresh the memory and can help keep narrators focused.

Remember to pay attention to what your interviewee is saying. Listening is crucial to the shaping of the interview. The biographer Theodore Rosengarten, playing back the tape of an interview just finished, was astonished at how much he had missed:

The problem was, I had set out to question, not to listen. My mind was full of chatter and thoughts about my questions. I had not listened at all. I had allowed my machine to do the listening when I should have done it myself. (Rosengarten, in Marc Pachter, ed., *Telling Lives*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.)

While you’re listening, take notes – not just on what you’ll need for the labels, but also on difficult spellings, specific dates, others who are present for the interview, and the physical setting where the interview is conducted. This information not only helps with transcription later, but it provides an atmosphere to orient the listener or reader. You can also use your notes to summarize what the speaker has said. Then, you can either frame your follow-up questions or simply wait for the speaker to add more information.

Specifically, there are eight categories of contextual information that you might want to record in your notebook:

1. Physical setting, including the positions of both the interviewer and interviewee;
2. Social setting, such as the interviewee’s community status, dress, and age;

3. Nature of interaction between participants (mood, rapport, interruptions);
4. Performance (your interviewee's pace, enthusiasm, coherence, and candor);
5. Time of day and length of interview;
6. Non-verbal behavior, such as gestures, smiles, facial expressions, laughs, and inflections;
7. Miscellaneous observations, such as how the interviewee and interviewer were selected, unusual amendments to the transcript, libelous statements, and critical challenges to historical record; and
8. Information on the interviewer and the project.

If your interviewee is prepared and both of you keep on topic, things will go so well that turning off the recorder at your appointed hour will be hard. But persevere, for historical interviews that become chats may never be transcribed. The fewer hours recorded the more likely their processing and deposit – without which the public has no access to these valuable recollections.

And finally, organize immediately! The first step after turning the recorder off is to label *everything* – both box and tape – with the names of the interviewee and interviewer, the date, and other details a later user of the tape might need to know. That way, there's no danger of a tape going astray. This is also the time to fill out an Interview History Sheet (see Appendix F). An interview history is the place to write, with candor, about the interaction of the interview, and to note any pertinent facts about it.

Chapter Two: Analyzing and Archiving

Now that you've got your project assembled, equipped, and prioritized, and you've recorded your first interviews, the real work begins: analyzing and archiving (depositing the interview so the public can use it). Oral history isn't just asking questions and getting answers. It's also making sure that history becomes accessible to the public, enriching their knowledge about your community and its roots. This chapter will go over the steps necessary to take your recordings from the tape to the public: transcribing, editing, auditing, depositing, publishing, cataloging, publicizing, and finally, using that text.

After labeling the tape, make a backup copy of the tape and label it, too. The backup copy should be used for any further processing, while the original is saved as an archival copy. Update the whiteboard with this information, so that project coordinators know what stage of processing the interview has reached. This, along with the Interview History Sheet (Appendix F), will make sure everyone working with the interview is up-to-date on its status, and will ensure that work is not duplicated.

Will your project just catalog or actually transcribe interviews? Somehow the reader or listener needs to know what's on the tape. An **interview catalog** is a running list of topics in the interview, in the order spoken. (A sentence for every two or three paragraphs is adequate.) A **transcription** is usually a verbatim typescript of the interview itself. The plus side is that with a transcript, the whole interview is before you, just as it happened. The minus side is that transcription takes time if it's to be done well. The transcription process involves the actual transcribing (listening to a recording and typing out the words as spoken); printing your resulting transcript; and checking the transcript against the actual tape (this is called auditing). It further involves returning the transcript to the narrator to review for spelling errors, dates, etc.; and asking the narrator to sign a release (which allows you to make the interview available to the public). Finally, you can file the transcript "as is," or edit it first – cutting out false starts, linking up sentence fragments, etc. – which may make it easier to read. A guide to this process is Willa Baum's *Transcribing and Editing Oral History* (1998, Rowman and Littlefield.)

If your project plans to transcribe, then borrowing or buying a transcribing machine (which costs about \$200) is crucial. These come with foot-activated play and rewind features, so that the operator never has to take his hands off the keyboard to start, stop, or rewind while

typing. If you can't afford a transcribing machine, your project might be able to borrow one from a school or library. Alternatively, you can transcribe directly from the tape or disc player, starting and stopping the recording as needed. It's hard, time-consuming work! Yet either a transcript or catalog is essential to making the material useful and accessible to future researchers.

The next step is auditing the transcript, which means checking the recording against the printed transcript to note which names, spellings, and dates need to be verified. This is also the best time to assemble an index – a basic subject listing. Again, we see the advantage of having fewer, more thoroughly processed interviews: transcribing and auditing are time-consuming. Don't let the backlog of unprocessed interviews grow too high. There is nothing wrong with just cataloging an interview by listing its topics in order; this information will be complete enough to guide anyone working with the materials to the information they're seeking. More time-consuming tasks can be set aside until later.

Regardless of whether you transcribe or catalog, you absolutely must *index*. A one-page index lists, in short phrases, the topics covered (noting the side of the tape or the numbers recorded on the disc). The index is important – this may be the first and only tool that someone scans to find out if they want to read the interview. The index should not only inform the reader about what is in the interview, but also tell them where to find it quickly. It's a rare historian who is willing to sit through hours of an interview on the off-chance they might find something useful. A good index is a key part of ensuring your work's later use.

Once audited and indexed, the transcript or catalog should be returned to the original interviewee for his or her review. The interviewee can double-check the names, dates, and spellings that were marked during the audit. The narrator will also be the person most likely to catch transcription errors (such as transcribing, “They used to have the customers sitting up with the dead” when what the narrator had said was, “They used to have the custom of sitting up with the dead”). Such errors occur inevitably. This is also the time when discrepancies are cleared up. If official records list a “great flood” in 1927 and the interviewee lists a “great flood” in 1922, it may well be that there were two – or more – “great floods.”

At this stage, or at the time of the interview, the interviewees must sign a permission statement saying that they have released his story to the oral history project. (See Appendix E, Sample Oral History Release Form.) This is important: without this signed permission form, no one has the right to publish, deposit, or otherwise use the materials. You will need to have the

release in hand when you deliver your oral history materials to a public depository, as few archives will accept a collection without written releases (including conveyance of copyright). We'll talk more about legal issues such as these, in Chapter 3.

Finally, once the indexed transcript or catalog is printed out, the oral history project will turn over the tape, interview history, transcript or catalog, index, and release forms to a library or archive that promises to make the materials available to the public through its catalog. (See Appendix G, Sample Oral History Checklist for Deposit.) Remind the librarian or archivist to give you a copy of the listing, so that your group can refer people accurately and quickly to the interview and finding aids. Librarians and archivists can assist oral historians in many more ways than just housing your interviews: for instance, loaning recording or transcribing equipment, making suggestions for interviewees, or mounting an exhibition.

Today, the field is more conscious of the process of oral history, and of how meaning and analysis are embedded in the way questions are asked and answers understood. Who's asking? Who's telling? These are questions asked by those analyzing a historical text; if they're lucky, the answers are contained in that interview history that precedes the transcript or catalog.-Analysis begins there, and in the many good articles and books written by those who came before.

Route 66 inspires millions with its image of fast cars and distant horizons, yet only slowly are we recording its history with precision. Perhaps the ultimate significance of your interviews will need time to be realized, which is why we treat these interviews with such planning and care, and leave them where the future may find them. People will always come to Route 66 for kicks, but the next generation may be lucky enough also to have the shining historical records your hard work will leave behind.

Chapter Three: Using Oral History

You've researched and recorded an interview, transcribed (or cataloged) and audited it. Now what? What's the point, I was once asked, in telling people history if it's "just going to end up in a box somewhere"? What *is* the point?

Don't let all the work you've done gather dust. You have your interviews – use them! After (and before) the first set of interviews, plan for their later use: publications and exhibitions, web sites and public forums. This planning usually involves actively re-editing what has been recorded: for instance, selecting specific sections of transcripts and arranging them for a publication. Where personal memory and recorded events differ, you may consider annotating the publication, noting both the standard version and that remembered – often more colorful – by someone who was actually there.

Your first users may be students visiting a school library or public collection. (Many university libraries are open to the public.) An interview history or index will certainly help them find the information they're seeking. Accommodating those writers and outsiders fascinated by your community is a generous and effective way to encourage use of your oral histories.

Legal-Use Matters

Just because materials are placed in a public archive does not necessarily mean that they are legally available for all uses. You need to take that one critical step – getting your release forms signed– to ensure that your oral histories will be truly available to the public.

Questions about release forms, copyright, and publication can be complex. An excellent authority is a book written by John Neuenschwander, *Oral History and the Law* (2nd edition, 1993) (available from the Oral History Association, www.dickinson.edu/oha). The most important point here is that an oral history interview *must* be covered by a signed release (see example, Appendix E), which transfers copyright for that interview to your organization or the nonprofit sponsor. Copyright protects the owner of an original work – in this case, the interviewee—from unauthorized use of his or her material. By signing the release, interviewees give your organization the right to make their interviews public, and to use them in a variety of public ways (exhibits, books, etc.). When these interview materials are transferred to an archive, the organization will in turn transfer copyright to that institution.

Be aware, though, that sometimes interviewees say things they really shouldn't, and these remarks may turn up in interview transcripts. Remarks about living persons should be reviewed for libel or invasion of privacy. *Libel* is a written, untrue statement about a person that injures his or her reputation or standing in the community (*slander* is the spoken form of libel.) *Privacy* is a person's right to be left alone. If a transcript makes public any sensitive personal information about another person, those remarks may be invading his privacy. Often, the narrator will spot those kinds of comments while reviewing his or her transcript, and will ask that they be struck from the transcript and/or recording. Otherwise, you should take that step yourself, to protect the third party, your organization, the interviewer, the interviewee, the depository, and potential users of your materials.

If portions of the interview are considered too controversial to circulate, you might insert a few blank pages when you deposit the materials, to indicate that some information has been left out. This is the narrator's decision, usually.

You may also have a legal obligation to organizations that have given you grant money. For example, if you have received grant funds you have an obligation to develop an exhibit or product by a specific date – perhaps by publishing results, or assembling audio/video presentations, or producing a radio show or television program, or designing a fixed-media exhibit of photos and selected quotations from interviews. If you haven't received grant money, your group will still want to consider these and other options, such as community drama or history day types of events for schools.

Publicity

Even if you are working purely from volunteer resources, you'll still need to publicize your project. Hold an event to launch your oral history project and let the world know what you've done. Local papers and broadcasters are particularly open to such presentations, given enough notice. All that will be involved, in many cases, is sending out a press release a week or two before the event, designating someone on your committee to speak for the project, and making follow-up calls. Publicity could turn out to be a great source of members and donations.

Oral History Radio

Assembling a radio program, a logical use for audio-format materials, is hard but rewarding. Much of the program can be prepared at home on computers, using software such as Protools™. There's a lot that goes into a radio program – you'll want to find someone who knows the technical and mechanical details – so this section concentrates on the three major phases: pre-production, production, and post-production. These are parallel to the three major phases of an oral history project: planning, interviewing, and use.

Pre-Production. First, what is the purpose of your program? Who is your audience? And can you do the work yourself, or are you going to need extra help?

Second, what's already been done on this subject? What can you find that can be used to good effect? Look at other, similar projects: who funded them? How were they received? How were they distributed?

Third, design your project. How long will it be? What information will you include, and what will you leave out? How will you distribute your product? Who will be responsible for what parts of the project?

Now that you've got the ground prepared, assemble your resources. Find equipment and technical assistance. Schedule your production. Prepare a rough script, to include both the framework of the program and the production elements (narration, actuality, music, sound effects). Remembering your audience and your purpose, decide what your story is, and how you will present it.

Production. First, review your materials, taking notes. Start with the selections you *know* you want to use, and then find supplemental materials for transitions. Contact a local public station's program director, to determine their interest and what length they might use. Then, with all this covered, revise your script, building toward a conclusion. Selectivity and pacing are quite critical to avoid boring an audience; scripts should show movement and develop a story.

Second, assemble your other production elements on a single disc, or load them into a computer. Finish editing, and then record your narration. You might find a trained voice in the local acting or broadcasting community to record this for you.

Third, edit and mix these production elements. Consider how music or library sound effects might be used. Time your production, and check it against your original projected length.

Post-Production. After setting your program aside for a while, come back to it with a clear mind. Listen to it, cut (as and if appropriate), and prepare it for distribution. Put together a brochure, a mailing, a press release to let the stations know. Circulate copies to interested producers and to authorities on your subject, so they can help get the word out.

Oral History on the Internet

There is a surprising amount of history being posted and discussed on the internet these days, from archive collections hosted by the Library of Congress to grassroots oral history projects. The internet can be an effective way of publicizing and distributing your work, and state-level Route 66 Association web pages are a good place to start. On a web page, you can post a list of interviews conducted, a call for interviewees, and the completed transcripts or catalogs of finished interviews. With that essential signed release from the interviewee, you can post excerpts from interview tapes. Any basic book on building a web site can help you out with these projects.

However, not everyone has access to the internet, so don't forget to deposit tapes and transcripts/catalogs with your local library! A pointer on your web site to the local library's home page will help advertise the existence and location of your work.

For further background on oral history projects on-line, visit the web site of the American Folklore Center of the Library of Congress at www.loc.gov.

Public Forums

If you're making oral presentations on your topic, supported by excerpts from the oral histories collected, find a meeting room, post the time and send a few paragraphs of description to the media outlets – and they will come. Just by preparing press releases for print and broadcast and having them distributed by state associations, the author of this publication has been featured in dozens of small-town newspapers, radio stations, and even on television. But this publicity, useful for the sponsoring group, points to a one-shot affair, and so, you should rely on networking to keep your community in touch with Route 66 oral history projects.

Networking isn't just about keeping the media up to date. It's also about forming partnerships with local institutions: recruiting public and school librarians, teachers at high schools and local colleges, and staff from museums. Each of these groups has its own reason to

get its name out there in front of the public. Beyond bringing their collective expertise to brainstorming sessions on how to organize and fund oral history projects, these groups also have their own networks they can share.

Evaluation

Finally, having conducted a first set of interviews and announced its existence through the media, you'll want to evaluate your efforts. Did the costs of producing the first set of transcripts exceed the original cost estimate? How did the various processes – research planning, research, interviewing, processing – go? Even gathering those working on the oral history once, for an hour or two, to discuss these topics can yield a one- or two-page evaluation that can prove invaluable in attracting additional funds and participants.

Pretty soon, as the word spreads about your good works, you might not be able to keep away all the people who want to help.

Conclusions

Oral history is the democratic side of history. Whether an individual researcher pursuing his or her own study, or a group of volunteers staffing a community project, oral historians are concerned with finding a place in time – a community place, a family – for the Old Road. Oral history sits at the crossroads of personal experience and its situation in wider historical currents.

What a load of stories and history crossed that concrete, asphalt, and dirt road over the years! Every bump, every cussing session through that amazing Texas mud, every dangerous curve through the Ozarks told a tale. Our job is to find the stories and ask the questions that allow our generation, and the ones to follow, to know these stories as history – our history.

All this depends on the interviewer keeping on track. We all hem and haw. The interviewer's job is to be quiet, helpful and well-prepared, leading the interviewee to a particular time and place to stimulate and focus memory. This is how a community's history is preserved, in our electronic computer age.

By returning history-making to the public via public oral history, we make sure that those who lived it, tell it. Those who hear it, record it. Those who transcribe and edit it, analyze it. And those who give the past back to the public receive rewards and recognition. It's hard to think of a better cycle for making a community proud of its past.

About the Author

For over twenty years David Dunaway, a professor at the University of New Mexico, has taught and used oral history. With Willa Baum, he edited the field's first reader, *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, published first in 1984 by the American Association for State and Local History and again in 1996 by Altamira Press. He's collected oral tradition in the huts of the Masai people in Africa, and interviewed the head of CBS Network News; he's tape-recorded history from a canoe on the Amazon, and in the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. He's best known for using oral history in radio, TV, and film – including a radio series on Route 66, "Across the Tracks," that aired on hundreds of stations nationally and on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*. For three years he directed an oral history project funded in part by the National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program.

About the Editor

Kathleen Hardy is a relative newcomer to oral history. Her roots on Route 66, though, go back four generations: she, like her parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, grew up driving, working, and studying on the Main Street of America. She completed her MA in English (Professional Writing) at the University of New Mexico and is employed by the state as a grant writer.

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Appendix C: Sample Oral History Project Management Sheet

Activities	Responsible Status Date	Activities	Responsible Status Date
Setting up a base of operations	Joe Done 8-10-05		
Acquiring equipment			
Researching existing information	Mary Pending 8-10-05		
Selecting topics	Larry Pending 8-22-05		
Acquiring funding	Joe Grant submitted 8-12-05		
Identifying possible interviewees			
Arranging Interviews			

Oral History Project Management Sheet

Activities	Responsible Status Date	Activities	Responsible Status Date
Setting up a base of operations			
Acquiring equipment			
Researching existing information			
Selecting topics			
Acquiring funding			
Identifying possible interviewees			
Arranging interviews			

Appendix D: Sample Oral History Interview Processing Sheet

Interviewee	Dunaway	Hardy	Weismuller	Bronte	
Action	Responsible Status Date	Responsible Status Date	Responsible Status Date	Responsible Status Date	Responsible Status Date
Contacting	Joe / Done 8-10-05				
Gathering Context	Mary Pending 8-10-05				
Interviewing		Larry Pending 8-22-05			
Transcribing	Joe/Done 8/24/05				
OR Cataloging					
Auditing					
Indexing					
Reviewed by Interviewee					
Release Signed					
Deposited					

Oral History Interview Processing Sheet

Interviewee						
Action	Responsible Status Date	Responsible Status Date	Responsible Status Date	Responsible Status Date	Responsible Status Date	Responsible Status Date
Contacting						
Gathering Context						
Interviewing						
Transcribing						
OR Cataloging						
Auditing						
Indexing						
Reviewed by Interviewee						
Release Signed						
Deposited						

Appendix E: Sample Interviewee Release Form

To be completed by interviewees,

I, _____, am participating voluntarily in a Route 66 Oral History Project. I understand that the project's purpose is to produce and collect audio- and video-recorded interviews (including transcripts of the interviews and photographs of the interviewee) and to collect existing documentary materials (including photographs and manuscripts) related to the history of Route 66. I understand that some or all of those materials may be deposited in the permanent collection of an archive or library and may be used for scholarly, educational, or other purposes, including exhibition, publication, or presentation on the internet and successor technologies.

I hereby grant to the archive or library the royalty-free, nonexclusive, and irrevocable right to reproduce, publish, or otherwise use my recorded interview for scholarly, educational, or other purposes, and to allow others to do so. Furthermore, I grant to the archive or library any and all right, title, or interest I own in any tangible personal property, including existing documentary materials that I deliver to the interviewer, archive, or library. Finally, I transfer any and all right, title, or interest I own in the copyright of any existing documentary materials I deliver to the interviewer, archive, or library. **By giving permission, I understand that I do not give up any use I may wish to make of my interview or photographs.**

I hereby waive any and all claims, demands, and causes of action (including, but not limited to, claims for defamation and invasion of the right of privacy) against the interviewer, archive or library, and release them from any and all liability arising out of the use of my recorded interview or any existing documentary materials I deliver to the interviewer, archive, or library.

Accepted and Agreed

Signature _____ Date _____

Printed Name _____

(Signature of Parent/Guardian (if interviewee is a minor) _____ Date _____

Printed Name of Parent/Guardian _____)

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ - _____

Telephone (_____) _____ Email _____

Relationship, if any, to interviewer _____

Appendix G: Sample Oral History Checklist for Deposit

Before submitting your recordings to your local archive, be sure you have included the following:

1. Recorded interview. After recording the interview, the plastic tabs should be removed from the audio cassette or mini disc to prevent recording over. Media must be labeled with the full name of the interviewee.
2. Release form signed by each person interviewed (see sample in Appendix E).
3. Interview catalog or transcript.
4. Index
5. Interview history sheet (see sample in Appendix F).

Appendix H: Sample Route 66 Interview Questions

Background

Where and when were you born?

Describe your schooling.

What is your earliest memory of Route 66?

General Information

When did you take your first ride on Route 66?

Did your family travel Route 66?

Did you or your family live or work on Route 66?

When? Describe what route 66 looked and sounded like then.

History

What years do you recall best on Route 66?

What happened in those years, chronologically?

Did your community depend on Route 66? How?

What did Route 66 mean to your community?

What do you know about Route 66:

Tourism?

Roadside businesses?

Art or architecture?

Dangers?

Local routing?

Further Resources

Do you have any Route 66 photographs, diaries or tapes, or interviews?

Do you want to suggest anyone else to be interviewed?

What is their contact information?

Will you sign our release form, so we can deposit this interview in an archive for future researchers?