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# Oral History Project Toolbox

(Scouts)

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## What is an oral history?

Oral history is a **field of study and a technique for gathering, preserving, and interpreting voices and memories of people and communities**. It is a way to create primary sources from the people that experienced past events. Oral histories have a specific purpose for why they are collected. The overall goal of oral history is to gather original information and experiences of an individual or community to gain more knowledge about an event or place, and to capture voices outside of the written word.

An oral history consists of a well-prepared and informed interviewer that asks questions of a narrator (interviewee) for first-hand information about events they participated in or knowledge they possess from witnessing history. An oral history is preserved through audio or video format. Oral history supplements traditional archives and may help fill gaps in their collections, meaning the absence of minority voices or everyday people.

## Preparing for the Interview

1. Review the biographical form provided by the adult lead.
2. You may want to conduct basic biographical research on your interviewee via the internet searches or publications. For example, if they were a tank commander you may do some research on the roles and responsibilities of tank commanders and use that information to ask questions important to their service.
3. Don't be afraid to add questions to the guide! You may want to ask questions relevant to the interviewee's experience. Take out topics that don't pertain to them and add questions that do.
4. Practice with the equipment before the interview with family or friends. Make sure that you have all the necessary pieces of equipment, such as the recorder, a power cord, extension cord, etc.
5. The day before the interview, confirm time and place with the adult lead.

## Conducting the Interview

1. Bring with you: equipment, extension cord, cell phone (in case of equipment problems), question guide, notetaking items.
2. When you arrive, assess room for sound. Turn off phones, etc. You may need to rearrange furniture so that you and the interviewee face each other. Set up your equipment to face the interviewee, but close enough for you to monitor it.
3. Explain to the interviewee that the interview will be preserved at the Virginia War Memorial and may be used for research, display, education, and exhibits. Explain that they can choose what questions to answer, and that the recorder can be turned off at any time.
4. With the adult lead, go over the release form with the interviewee, and make sure they are comfortable with the interview. If they want to proceed, make sure they sign the release form before you begin the interview. Make sure you sign the form too.
5. Hit record on your device and begin with a brief introduction (see question guide for script)

## Things to Keep in Mind

1. Allow the interviewee to do the talking.
  - a. Do allow the interviewee to tell "THE STORY." Most interviews have a favorite story. They will fit it in somehow, so let it happen!
2. Ask "open-ended" questions, such as, tell me about, describe, etc., what do you remember about?
3. Avoid "closed-ended" questions that can end in a yes or no, or single fact. If the interviewee responds with just a yes or no, ask how, why, when, where, who.
4. Do not ask leading questions such as "was it this or that?" These have been demonstrated to affect interviewee's answer and will taint your interview.
  - a. Example: "I thought that the most important thing was...."
5. What the interviewee chooses to tell you and how they choose to tell it is just as informative/revealing as the actual answers they give.
6. Try to ask follow-up questions – tell me more, who, what, where.
7. Don't worry about silences. Let the interviewee think and take time before they answer. Look at your outline and check off topics if the interviewee needs time to think.
8. Allow the interviewee to drift off to topics not on your outline. These can be the best part of your interview.
9. Provide the interviewee with non-verbal feedback by nodding, smiling, listening attentively.
10. End the interview by asking if the interviewee has any final words or story to share.

Clean up. Make sure you have all pieces of equipment.

# Question Guide

## Before the interview:

1. Establish informed consent.
  - a. Explain to participants that they will be recorded, that this will be preserved. Send the participant the Oral History Release Form ahead of time.
2. Research
  - a. If they're there to talk about a specific topic, take the time to do some reading so you have the vocabulary to talk to them about the subject.
3. Prepare basic topics and questions
  - a. This will not be a complete checklist of questions as you will be reacting what the interviewee is saying and asking appropriate follow up questions.
  - b. Questions should be open ended. The goal is for the participant to tell their story. These topics can often be hard to speak about, so be mindful.
4. Allow the participant to speak for as long or as little as they like, although keep in mind the time that the participant has set aside for the interview
5. Always start the interview with the introduction to establish who, what, when, and where.

## Start of interview:

Today is [full date]. This is [your full name and your title] interviewing [interviewees full name]. Can I get you to say and spell your name? Can you also tell us what branch of the military you served in, the years you served, and the highest rank you achieved?

## General Questions:

### **Background**

1. When and where were you born? Could you tell me about where you grew up?
2. Do you have any family history of military service?

### **Military Service**

3. When and why did you to join the military? Were you drafted or did you volunteer?
4. Where did you do your basic training? Can you tell me about your experience?
5. Can you tell me about any training did you receive afterward? (AIT or OCS)
6. Where were you first assigned after you finished basic training?
7. Is there anything about that first assignment that sticks out in your mind?
8. Can you walk me through your other assignments? When and where were they?
9. Do you remember any highlights or key events that happened during your time in the military?

### **If the veteran was a Scout**

1. Were you in Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, or Explorers?
2. What was the highest rank in Scouting that you achieved?
3. How long were you in Scouting?
4. Could you tell me about why you became a Scout?
5. Tell me about your Scouting experience?
6. What are some of your favorite memories or events from your Scouting experience?

7. Could you tell me about the others you knew in Scouting?
8. (If the veteran volunteered for military service) Did your scouting experience influence your decision to join the military?
9. How did scouting impact your military service experience?

**Conclusion**

1. How was that transition from military life to becoming a civilian for you?
2. (If not native to Virginia ask) What is your connection to Virginia?
3. What was your biggest accomplishment or something you were proud of during your service?

Finishing the interview:

Thank the interviewee for their time and announce that you are stopping the recording.

Ensure that you have the signed Release form [asap], bio information, and ask if they would like to send a photograph of themselves from their time in the military to attach to their interview.