

ORAL HISTORIES KIT



FROM G.S.O. ARCHIVES

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Tips for Collecting Oral Histories

What is Oral History?

History provides accounts of the past through memory, folklore, pictures, documents, artifacts and monuments. Events and stories from the past help provide perspectives that allow for thoughtful decision making today. However, memory is fallible, and if significant events or stories are not captured, we can lose parts of the past.

Oral history refers to the process of recording and preserving of oral testimony of an individual's own experiences. By joining our efforts to collect and preserve oral testimonies, you are helping to conserve A.A. history for present and future generations.

This paper provides basic suggestions for conducting and preserving the valuable historical treasures in your region, district or area.

Pre-Interview Preparation

The interviewer should do background reading and research on the interviewee and on A.A. in the local area, consulting the General Service Office Archives, The Grapevine Archives, old Conference and Assembly reports, area or district newsletters, directories for information. Preparation is vital to a successful interview.

Before the interview, contact the interviewee via regular mail or Email and express the purpose of the interview. Your explanation should be brief and clear. Discuss the time commitment involved and the topics that will be covered. You may wish to give the interviewee a list of topics you might cover, in addition to a biographical sketch for the interviewee to fill out. These materials, given a week or so in advance of the actual interview, will stimulate an interviewee's memories. Indicate that any other related topics which he or she can think of will be useful for the interview.

Remember to bring the interviewee's Release Form and or any other legal documents as deemed appropriate.

As the interviewer, you should be active in setting-up arrangements. This includes confirming a date, time, and location. Ideally, the location should be a quiet place where the interviewee feels comfortable. The interviewee's home is a great option.

The Interviewer's Equipment

You will want to use a tape recorder, mini-disc recorder, or portable CD recorder to record an oral history interview. There are a number of recorders available, and each has its benefits and drawbacks. Ideally, the device should be small so that its presence is inconspicuous. A local library or historical society may loan this kind of equipment.

To avoid disruptions during the interview become familiar with the equipment and know how to quickly change tapes.

The interview should be conducted in a quiet environment without any extraneous noise. Avoid sitting near windows, air conditioners or fans. Place the recorder near you and the interviewee. You may want to run a test prior to the actual interview to check the sound in your particular environment.

Remember to take along paper and pens; extra cassette tapes; batteries; an extension cord; question outline and necessary research materials.

Note-taking during the interview is discouraged as it could be tedious or distracting to the interviewee. However, taking a few notes is okay if it is not too distracting. Jot down names and places or questions which come up unexpectedly.

The People

You may feel uncomfortable conducting your first interview. To ease anxiety, it is advisable that the first person you interview is someone who you are comfortable with.

In some cases it is also advisable to interview a group of long timers together – a sponsor and sponsee, a group of people who started a group together or got sober together, friends who have been in the same group for decades, etc. These kinds of interviews can be both fun and informative. The interaction that occurs as a matter of course serves to spark the memories of the participants. One story leads into another, one interpretation elicits cries of "but that's not really the way it happened at all!" The end result of such an interview will differ greatly from private interviews with the same individuals.

The Interview

The interview should be conducted within parameters agreed upon by both parties. The following tips should be helpful while conducting the interview:

1. Begin the recording by stating your name, the date, time, interviewee's name, and place of interview.
2. Exhibit self-confidence and enthusiasm, remain aware of your body language and make eye-contact with the interviewee.
3. Ask easy questions first until a rapport develops between you and the interviewee.
4. Once a comfortable environment is attained, begin to ask questions that will prompt a detailed response.
5. There will be some information that the interviewee will not wish to disclose. Don't pry. This information may be personal.

6. Ask for examples to support general statements or explanations as these might be critical to the interview.

7. The sample interview questions, beginning on page 8, are only intended as a general guideline. You are encouraged to adapt the questions as you deem fit.

8. Although going into an interview with a prepared list of questions is vital to a successful interview, deviating from that list is okay and should be encouraged. The interviewee should feel welcomed to go off on tangents. Create an environment that encourages the interviewee to elaborate. Try ending the interview by asking if the interviewee has anything else they would like to share. It is possible that your prepared list of questions did not allow the interviewee to address a topic they wished to discuss.

9. If necessary, use props such as photographs, scrapbooks, letters or other objects that may stimulate memories.

10. Do not shut off the tape recorder unless requested. Turning it off and on periodically is not only distracting but it gives the illusion that the material is not worth recording.

11. Interviews should be scheduled at a convenient time and place for the interviewee. If the interviewee begins to feel fatigued you may consider ending the interview. It may be possible to continue the interview at another time.

Post Interview

1. Immediately following the interview, secure a signed Release Form from the interviewee. Be sure that the interviewee understands:

- that either the recording or transcription produced thereafter may be used for the subject of research by members of A.A. or scholars and researchers, unless access restrictions are stipulated otherwise. Permission must be secured via a signed release.
- his or her rights, including the transference of all literary and copyrights to the Archives repository or designated body.

2. Be sure to thank the interviewee for his or her willingness to participate in the project. Follow up with a written “thank you” letter.

3. Label tapes with names, dates and places.

4. The Archives repository or responsible body is charged with the preservation and appropriate storage of the oral history interview. Whenever possible, efforts should be made to preserve electronic files in formats that are either nonproprietary or cross platform. Make a copy of each tape!

5. In order to augment access, consider making a transcription of the interview and creating a catalog to include: Name, title, date, storage type, detailed notes, user restriction on access, or other written guides to the contents.

6. The interviewer or repository must comply with the rights of the interviewee to restrict access to the interview, or portions of it, if stipulated and to respect the interviewee's rights to maintain his/her anonymity.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

Most A.A. members will be delighted by your interest in collecting their histories. Unfortunately, a few may be uncooperative and even hostile or they may simply wish not to participate. It's important to be honest about the purpose of the recording from the beginning. If you plan on publishing your findings, it is advisable to explain this to the interviewee prior to the interview.

Because of the personal nature of the stories that you will be collecting, you should be especially careful to preserve anonymity at the level of the public media, and in all other ways, protect the privacy and rights of all involved.

Do have the interviewee sign a release form. A sample release form can be found on page 12. By means of a simple release form, the interviewer insures both the integrity and continuity of an oral history project and safeguards each interviewee's rights.

Transcribing and/or Indexing Oral History Tapes

Creating verbatim transcription of tapes is ideal, but these are incredibly time consuming; in general, one hour of tape-recorded interview equals approximately 50 pages of typescript, and 8-12 hours of labor. Creating a detailed subject index for each tape is an adequate substitution for a verbatim transcription. While listening to the tapes, you may want to note what topics are being discussed and when. For example, if the interviewee attended the International Convention in New Orleans and shares his/her experience there, in the subject index you may note "International Convention-New Orleans, Louisiana [30:28]. A digital counter found on most tape recorders will be useful for this process.

Take care to record any names used on the tape, especially if any A.A. member is identified by first and last name, as an aid to preserving anonymity if the tape is ever to be released widely.

Sample Introductory Letter to Interviewee

When reaching out to potential oral history candidates, it is useful to send an introductory letter describing your project and the reasons you are requesting an interview. This template may be adapted and used as an introductory letter.

Date

Address

Dear _____

Warm greetings from the _____ [area or district]

In my role as [service position], I am embarking on a project to conduct oral histories with many significant figures in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. We would like to add to our archives collection through a new project of interviewing A.A.s and friends of A.A. to capture their memories of the organization.

Therefore, I would like to request an opportunity to record your memories of A.A. and your work with the Fellowship. An interview with you would greatly add to our collections and to the body of A.A. history. The interview would take place at a location of your choosing (your home would be fine), at a time that is convenient for you. It would take just a few hours.

If you would be willing to sit for a recorded interview with me, please just let me know. If you would like to discuss it further, you are welcome to contact me any time. Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Very best wishes,

Name of Interviewer

Oral History Biographical Sketch

Filing out this form before the interview may help the interviewer ask more appropriate and interesting questions. The interviewee shouldn't feel compelled to complete the entire form, but only those parts of it that are applicable and relevant.

Subject's Full Name: _____

Telephone No. _____

E-mail Address _____

Address _____

Family History

Birth Date & Place of Birth _____

Spouse's Name _____

Date and Place of Marriage _____

Children's Names and Dates of Birth _____

Education, Career, and Activities

Primary Education (School & Location) _____

Dates _____

Secondary Education (School & Location) _____

Dates _____

Higher Education (School & Location) _____

Dates _____

Professions (Jobs), Locations, Dates _____

A.A. Service History _____

If Applicable:

Military Service (Branch, Rank, Dates) _____

Civic and Community Activities (Organization/Activity, Offices Held) _____

Other Pertinent Information _____

Prepared By _____

Date _____

Sample Interview Questions

The following are typical questions one might ask when conducting oral histories for the Fellowship. These are intended as a general guideline. You are encouraged to adapt the questions as you deem fit.

Before A.A.

- Please tell me a little about your life before you found A.A. When and where were you born? What kind of childhood did you have?
- As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?
- How did you start drinking?
- When and how did your drinking get out of control?
- When did you know you had hit bottom?

Recovery

- When did you first hear of A.A. and from what source?
- How and when did you get started in A.A.? When and where did you sober up? Where did you go to your first meeting? What did you think of it?
- Can you tell me about your early sobriety, your work through the Steps, and problems you had in those first days of learning the A.A. way?
- What was A.A.'s "reputation" in the community? How was it different or similar from what you encountered through your initial introduction?
- What was your perception of A.A.'s success in the general population when you were first introduced to us? How has that perception changed over time?
- Did you have a sponsor when you first came in? What type of sponsorship did you have?
- How many groups or meetings were in existence?
- Can you recall the formats used at some of these early meetings? How were they run?
- When was A.A. started in your town or area? How often were meetings held? Who were some of the people playing important roles in the formation of new groups? What else do you know about the growth of A.A. during that period of time?
- Which individuals were especially prominent in your sobriety?
- How were new members contacted? What kinds of Twelfth Step work were going on? Are there any Twelfth Step anecdotes that stick out in your mind that you'd care to share?
- Would you tell me about your experiences sponsoring others?

Unity – Group issues and community perception of A.A.

- Today, Conference-approved literature is available to help A.A. members deal with a wide variety of challenging questions. Early on, all you had was the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* and your experience. What did you think of the Big Book, and how often did you use it? How did early A.A.s treat newcomers? How did your group(s) treat constant slippers? Thirteenth steppers? How were people wishing to talk about multiple addictions during your meetings addressed? How about nonalcoholic drug addicts walking in off the street for their first meeting?
- We say sometimes that all that's needed to form an A.A. meeting is two drunks, a resentment and a coffeepot. Can you talk at all about the differences that led to new groups being formed in your area?
- In *A.A. Comes of Age*, Bill W. writes about numerous issues over which anger and contention arose and threatened the undoing of our Fellowship. The groups nationwide, for example, did not immediately accept the spiritual principles which we know today as the Twelve Traditions. What controversies over issues addressed in the Traditions can you recall people wrestling with? (How were meeting spaces acquired? Was rent or other funding obtained by gambling sessions? Bingo games? How did the membership resolve these affairs?)
- Today, A.A. is well known to, and supported by, police officers, judges and corrections officials. What kind of relationship did A.A. in your area have with local authorities? How has that changed since you sobered up?
- Treatment facilities today frequently host A.A. and other Twelve Step meetings. Did treatment centers exist in your area when you sobered up? Did any of them use a Twelve Step format or incorporate A.A. meetings into their structure?
- Did you seek the cooperation of other local community or professional agencies?
- Today, radio and television public service announcements for A.A., as well as Internet Web sites, are becoming commonplace. When you first got sober, how did A.A.s interact with the media? Have you had any profound experiences sharing your relationship with alcohol with the public? What cautions might you have for young A.A.s today regarding media exposure?
- During the early years of your recovery, how did the community receive Alcoholics Anonymous?
- Do you think your group(s) has had an influence in your community? If so, how?

Service

- How and why did you get into service work?
- What contributions did you, yourself, make to the growth of the Fellowship?
- What do you remember of early conferences, assemblies, and conventions? Can you recall opening Intergroup or Central Offices?
- Who made the initial outreach to you; in what manner and in what year?
- What were your first impressions of the active A.A. Legacies of Recovery, Unity and Service?
- What was your first impression of A.A. Trusted servants, G.S.O. staff, delegates? Describe your first encounters.
- What were your impressions of your first General Service Conference? What year?
- Describe some of the major decisions and Advisory Actions that involved your direct participation, as well as your committee activities over your years of service.
- In your memory, what particular Conference agenda items developed into Advisory Actions? Were there any that failed to gain Conference approval?
- Is there anything you regret? Any mistakes you believe you made? Any plans that failed that you wish had been successful?
- What special occasions do you recall during your time of A.A. service?
- How has A.A. changed (if it has) since you first found it?
- Do you see any particular changes in the A.A. Fellowship and its service processes, since your start in service?
- Are there any strong similarities in the A.A. Fellowship and its history of service, from your own service time through today?

Oral History Interview Information Form

This form details the scope of the oral history and provides invaluable information for future historians. Complete this form after the interview and keep it with the physical recording.

Narrator (Interviewee) _____

Date of Interview _____

Address _____

Telephone No. and e-mail Address _____

Interviewer _____

Address _____

Telephone No. and e-mail Address _____

Place of Interview _____

Length of Interview _____

Number of Cassettes or Discs _____

Oral History Release Form Signed _____ (Date)

Unrestricted ___ Restricted ___

Nature of Restrictions, if any: _____

Transcribed ___ Yes ___ No

Reviewed by Narrator

Yes _____ (Date) No ___

Abstract of Interview:

Sample Oral History Release Form

A release of some kind, establishing ownership of rights to the interview, should be obtained from every oral history interviewee, whenever possible. This sample form may be applicable in some circumstances. It is advisable to seek legal counsel whenever embarking on a large-scale recording project.

I, _____ (name of interviewee), hereby give this interview recorded on _____ (insert date) to the [include name] Archives as a donation. With this gift, I transfer to the [include name] Archives legal title and all literary rights, including copyright.

I understand the interview may be made available for research and such public programming as the [include name] Archives may determine. This includes right and license to reproduce, copy, modify, display, distribute, perform, broadcast, transmit, and create derivatives from the recording. This may include use of the interview material in print and in live or recorded programs for radio, television, or any electronic publishing medium.

I transfer all of the above rights without limitation, to support the mission of A.A. and to disseminate information about A.A., upon the condition that I, and any other A.A. member I identify, remain anonymous at the level of the public media.

This gift does not preclude any use that I may wish to make of the information in the recordings.

Signature of Interviewee

Name (printed)

Address

City, State/Province, Zip

Date

Signature of Interviewer

Name (printed)

Address

City, State/Province, Zip

Date

Comments: _____

Sample Thank-You Letter to Interviewee

This template may be adapted and used as a thank-you letter.

Date

Address

Dear _____

Thank you for participating in an oral history interview for the _____ Project. The information you gave in your interview was very helpful and will form an important part of the history of A.A. in _____.

(Optional) A transcript of the interview will be sent to you for your review. Please look it over and make sure that names and places are spelled correctly and that it is accurately transcribed.

If you have had some additional recollections that are significant to this project, please feel free to send them to us.

Thank you again for your time and your contribution.

Very best wishes,

Name of Interviewer

Sources for More Information

**Note: The G.S.O. Archives does not endorse nor affirm these Web sites and publications, and simply provided them as helpful external resources.*

Oral History Web Links

American Association for State and Local History
<http://www.aaslh.org/>

American Folklife Center (Library of Congress)
<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>

Oral History Association (OHA)
<http://www.oralhistory.org/>

Smithsonian Institution Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide
<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/InterviewingGuide.pdf>

Print Resources

Hart, Cynthia and Samson, Lisa. *The Oral History Workshop: Collect and Celebrate the Life of Your Family and Friends*. New York: Workman Publishing Company, Inc., 2009.

Powers, Willow Roberts. *Transcription Techniques for the Spoken Word*. Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2005.

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.