

Preface

“Oral history . . . can be a means for transforming both the content and purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and in the writing of history—whether in books, or museums, or radio and film—it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.”

—Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*

Oral history levels the playing field of historical research. You don't have to be a professional historian or a political mover-and-shaker to do it. Anyone with the interest, time, resources, and some training can undertake interviews for an oral history project—in a community, school, senior center, church, mosque, or temple. Changes in technology have made quality digital audio recorders and video camcorders available and affordable. There are no age barriers; oral history projects have been done by sixth-graders and octogenarians. Most important, there are no educational barriers; you do not need a PhD to interview doctors, farmers, computer scientists, coal miners, or quilters, and to present your interviews in a book, documentary, or exhibition. The democratic nature of oral history also has a profound impact on the topics covered. Community-based historians are likely to select topics that resonate with their own lives and with the memories and experiences of people like themselves—their work, family, traditions, and beliefs.

This sense of connection is important because so often history can seem distant and unrelated to our lives, work, family, or community. That's hardly surprising because of the way history has been taught in many countries. Children are asked to remember and recite in chronological order lists of monarchs, presidents, wars, treaties, laws, and national events. The problem with history, in the oft-quoted phrase, is that it's "one damned thing after another."¹ Or, as David Lowenthal more elegantly put it in *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, "It is so customary to think of the historical past in terms of narratives, sequences, dates and chronologies that we are apt to suppose these things are attributes of the past itself. But they are not; we ourselves put them there."² Indeed, we did. Inhabitants of fourteenth-century France did not realize they were living in the Middle Ages. The four hundred thousand young people who gathered for a four-day music festival in August 1969 did not know they were part of the Woodstock Generation, a label that came to represent a set of social and cultural values, until journalists and historians told them they were.

Even if we still find the past easiest to describe in epochal lumps—from the Renaissance to today's global society—at least we've moved beyond the great man-significant event view of history, where most of the actors were male and white and performed on a national or international stage. The study of history in U.S. schools and universities now devotes more attention to social, economic, and cultural trends and to issues of gender, ethnicity, class, family, and community. Indeed, some critics claim that the pendulum has swung too far and that political, military, and diplomatic history are now so neglected that some college-educated Americans confuse the two world wars and do not know which side the United States backed in Vietnam.

Almost all this history is written by academics and journalists or by the historical actors themselves—the politicians, generals, social activists, and pop-culture icons. As history, it can be

read, learned, debated, or adapted into a TV documentary or drama. But it's still the work of experts with PhDs, careers in public service, or some claim to popular fame or notoriety. It's not history that most people can practice.

Enabling more people to practice history has always been the mission of the authors of this guide. We are committed to help people—from professional historians to community volunteers—add oral history skills to their toolkit of methods and give them the confidence to take on new projects. That's the primary audience for *Catching Stories*—people who want to research the histories of their families, neighborhoods, businesses, religious, professional and social groups. The guide will also be useful to college professors and students who plan to use interviews in their research. There are excellent books that examine oral history from a theoretical perspective, and these works have helped us to think analytically about the discipline. But ours is a practical guide.

As a teaching team, we first came together in 2000 as Ohio prepared for its 2003 bicentennial celebration. With community history projects under way across the state, the Ohio Historical Society (OHS) and Ohio Humanities Council (OHC) offered a series of workshops on how to do local history projects. Donna DeBlasio, David Mould, Steve Paschen, and Howard Sacks conducted one-day oral history workshops entitled Tell Your Stories, Preserve Your Past. OHS and OHC then brought us together to lead a more intensive three-day summer oral history institute. The institute debuted at Youngstown State University in 2001 and has been held on the campus of Kenyon College, Ohio, every year since then. Over the years, we have worked with more than two hundred participants from across the United States and overseas.

We open *Catching Stories* with the same question we pose at the first session of the institute: Why do oral history (chapter 1)? We then provide a step-by-step process for planning a project (chapter 2) and discuss the ethical issues oral historians

face as they enter the living rooms—and the lives—of their interviewees (chapter 3). In chapter 4, we outline legal issues, including defamation, copyright and release forms, the sealing of interviews, and human subjects research. In chapter 5, we examine the interview from several perspectives—as a transaction, as historical evidence, and as performance—before providing practical tips on arranging and conducting interviews. Chapter 6 describes the process and challenges of transcribing oral history. And whereas other oral history guides give short shrift to technical issues, we devote two full chapters (7 and 8) to the principles of audio and video, providing advice on equipment and offering practical tips on how to obtain clear sound recordings and well-composed pictures. Because technology is always changing, it's tempting to skip this topic and offer the weak argument that any information published will be out of date. Machines and models certainly do change, but the physics of sound and light and the principles of analog and digital recording do not. Our experience is that oral historians both want and need to understand the technology and the language of the media they use. In chapter 9, we cover the basics of archiving oral history. Chapter 10 provides guidance on where to look for funding, how to approach foundations and other granting agencies, and how to put together a competitive proposal. Finally, we outline options for presenting—from traditional exhibits to multimedia and online presentations (chapter 11).

Each member of the team comes to this project from a different background. Donna is a trained historian who worked in the applied history field with the OHS and Cincinnati Museum Center before joining the faculty at Youngstown State University in 1999. David's academic training is also in history, but he teaches communications at Ohio University and has worked as a newspaper reporter, TV news writer, public radio producer, and documentary producer; he has also worked overseas, mostly in Asia. Steve began his professional career as

a landscape architect, returned to school to study history and library science, became a museum director, and is now an academic archivist at Kent State University with a fondness for local and regional history. Trained as a sociologist, Howard has spent much of his career exploring community life in rural central Ohio—its arts, agricultural practices, cultural diversity—and forging this work into a variety of public projects. To provide additional information and perspectives on technical issues, we invited Professor Charles Ganzert of Northern Michigan University, a former public radio producer, to join the team. Chuck teaches audio production and media law, manages a recording studio, advises a student radio station, and has produced award-winning live music and interview shows with his students.

With five authors, there are five voices. These voices emerge in the issues each of us considers important and in our different writing styles. We agree on many issues and practices in oral history and bring different yet complementary perspectives to others. We believe this diversity enriches the work.

We would like to thank the colleagues and friends who have supported the Oral History Institute, including our long-term sponsor, the OHC, its director Gale Peterson, its program officers Frank Dunkle and Jack Shortlidge, and J. D. Britton and Andy Verhoff of the OHS, who helped launch the institute. Special thanks go to John A. Neuenschwander, professor of history at Carthage College (Wisconsin) and author of *Oral History and the Law*, and to Edward Lee, associate professor in the Moritz School of Law at the Ohio State University, for their detailed review of the chapter on legal issues.

Most of all, we thank the many community historians with whom we have worked over the years. Our greatest reward is to see an oral history project begin to transform and inspire a community, bringing people together to learn about a shared past. This book is dedicated to the thousands of oral historians