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**Contact:** T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History  
LSU Libraries Special Collections  
Agnes Morris House  
Raphael Semmes Drive  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
(225) 578-6577  
[www.lib.lsu.edu/special/williams](http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/williams)  
[louisdl.louislibraries.org/THW/Pages/home.html](http://louisdl.louislibraries.org/THW/Pages/home.html)

**Mission:** To collect and preserve, through the use of tape-recorded interviews, unique and valuable information about Louisiana history that exists only in people's memories and would otherwise be lost. We accomplish this through interviews conducted by center staff, paid interviewers and volunteers, and by encouraging and assisting those who wish to carry out their own oral history projects. All interviews deposited and made available to researchers in the LSU Libraries Special Collections.

**History:** The oral history program at LSU began in August 1991 to record and preserve the oral history of the University. Since that time we have evolved into the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, created a collection of over 2,500 tape-recorded interviews totaling more than 3,500 hours of tape, initiated an ambitious series of interviews on the history of LSU, and established the Williams Center as a campus-wide resource for the support of teaching and research.

**Repository:** All interviews are processed and deposited at Hill Memorial Library Special Collections, where they are available through the Reading Room.

**Staff:** Jennifer Abraham, Director  
225-578-7439 / [jabrah1@lsu.edu](mailto:jabrah1@lsu.edu)

Trevis Thompson, Editor  
225-578-6577  
[tthomp2@lsu.edu](mailto:tthomp2@lsu.edu)

Matt Mullenix, Web Administrator  
225-578-7548 / [mmullen@lsu.edu](mailto:mmullen@lsu.edu)



## NOTES ON INTERVIEWING

An oral history interview involves a complex social interaction. No formula can guarantee success. Respect for the sanctity and complexity of human lives, intelligence, empathy, alertness, flexibility – all these hard-won personal qualities affect the interview situation. But interviewing is also a skill that can be learned with systematic practice. The suggestions which follow are meant to facilitate this process.

### **Preparation Before the Interview**

1. Begin by defining the historical problem you wish to investigate. Only then can you decide who to interview and what to ask them.
2. In order to avoid the danger of interviewer bias, you must be aware of your own cultural assumptions, values, and attitudes. An interview does not call for impossible neutrality, but it does demand special self-awareness and self-discipline.
3. Before conducting your first interview, do as much background research as possible. Oral investigation cannot be separated from or substituted for other methods of historical research.
4. Select respondents who will be able and willing to provide information you need. Respondents may be chosen because their lives illustrate certain historical processes or because they have special knowledge of or occupy a unique position in an historical event, movement, or institution.
5. Either in writing or in person (preferably followed by a letter of confirmation) explain the purpose of the interview to the respondent. If you are conducting the interview for the Williams Center as well as for your own research, be certain that the respondent understands this dual purpose.
6. Draw up an interview guide listing the topic or specific questions to be explored. If you are doing the interview for the Williams Center, it would be helpful for you to discuss this guide with the Center's staff in advance.
7. Before the interview, become thoroughly familiar with your recording equipment. Note names, date, and place on all tapes. Number them in sequence. Choose a setting for the interview which is as private and non-threatening to the respondent as possible. Set up your recorder matter-of-factly and don't fuss with it after the session begins.



## The Interview

8. Interviews may be autobiographical or topical. In either case, begin at a point in time previous to the central events you want to explore. For all interviews, include basic socio-economic information regarding family, geographical origins, and class.

9. The degree to which you control the course of the interview depends on its purpose and the nature of the questions you are posing. In general, you should seek a balance in which you allow respondents to express the logic of their lives as they understand them, while at the same time maintaining control over the overall direction of the conversation and framing questions so as to elicit information which is relevant, reliable, and valid. Listen carefully. Do not be afraid of silence. Allow the respondent time to think, to continue after a pause. Critically evaluate the flow of information, so that you can ask for clarification or elaboration where the respondent's statements are evasive, superficial, or unclear. Take notes which will remind you to ask such questions or to return to a topic from another angle, rather than interrupting the respondent's train of thought. Introduce new topics so as to guide the conversation in relevant channels.

10. Avoid leading or prejudicial questions. Your questions should be open-ended; they should not supply a list of alternative answers. They should be direct and to the point: avoid asking several questions in the guise of one. Frame questions within a language and context understood by the respondent.

11. Memory is most fallible regarding previous attitudes and feelings. Seek concrete examples from which you can infer subjective orientations. Focus on behavior; but try to understand the meaning the respondent attaches to his/her actions. Develop facts and events first, then explore feelings and values. You may need to stimulate the respondent's memory or reduce chronological confusion by supplying facts learned from background research.

12. It may be helpful to arrange the sequence of topics so as to postpone until last questions which may be threatening or challenging to the respondent. Within each topic, it may be helpful to begin with a broad question, then ask successively narrow and detailed questions as they prove necessary.

13. When a respondent seems unwilling or unable to provide certain information, or provides false information or rationalizations, you think, approach the topic from another angle, indicate contradictory information which you have from other sources, or wait until later in the interview to return to the topic.

14. Ordinarily an interview session should last no more than two hours. Be alert to signs of fatigue, distraction, or boredom. Conduct a long interview in several sessions. It is often



helpful to re-interview the respondent after you have analyzed the content of the interview and as your understanding of the research problem evolves.

15. During the interview, note proper names, places, and organizations. At the end of the session, confirm spelling. At that time, you should also have the respondent sign the Center's legal release form, indicating any restrictions on the use of the interview. This form transfers copyright to the Williams Center, making it possible to deposit the transcript and tape in the Louisiana State University Libraries for the use of future scholars.

### **After the Interview**

16. Make sure the tape is labeled with interviewee, interviewer, date, and session #.

17. Immediately after the session, listen to the tape. Evaluate both your own behavior and the content of the interview. Only by such self-criticism can you learn from your mistakes and acquire interviewing skills.

18. At the same time, index the tape listing the major topics covered in the interview and using the tape recorder's counter numbers to indicate where these topics can be found on the tape. You may also make notes on questions and topics to pursue in a second interview.

19. If you have conducted the interview for the Williams Center, send the labeled tapes with a list of properly spelled names, to the Center office. Also include a brief (1-2 page) introduction to the interview. This should contain: a description of the context of the interview (anything you consider significant about the goals, setting, gestalt); a biographical sketch of the respondent; a list of major written sources on the person or topic; relevant information about the interviewer. You must also include the signed release forms. We will not transcribe a tape without a release.

20. Once the interview has been transcribed, a copy will be sent to you for your corrections. You will then give that copy to the respondent, asking him/her to edit it for accuracy and clarity only. When the respondent returns the edited copy to us, we will transfer corrections to the original, which will then be deposited in the archives. A copy revised will be returned to the respondent.

21. Once the interview is done, "history making" begins. The interview is raw data which must be tested against and used in conjunction with other evidence. Oral history starts with the collection, transcription, and preservation of interviews. But its goal is historical synthesis and interpretation.



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## COLLECTIONS

### Established Series

*Acadian Handicraft Series* – Contains ten interviews on the Acadian Handicraft Project.

*Americans in Vietnam Series* – Contains sixty-six interviews with Vietnam Veterans. These interviews were conducted in the early 1970s by an LSU history class.

*Nadine Bopp Series* – Contains eighteen interviews with female landscape architects.

*Civil Rights Series* – Contains over forty interviews on the civil rights movement in Louisiana.

*Robert Ray Cox Series* – Contains eight interviews on the gardens of Shadows on the Teche in New Iberia, Louisiana.

*David Daugherty Series* – Contains seven interviews on Governor Sam Jones' administration.

*DeCaro-Jordan Anglo-Indian Series* – Contains forty interviews with Britons who lived in India prior to its independence.

*Frank DeCaro Folklife in Louisiana Photography Series* – Contains sixteen interviews with Louisiana photographers.

*Lorraine Hawkins Series* – Contains seventy-two interviews on the Horizon 2000 plan.

*Sue Hebert Series* – Contains seven interviews on the Atchafalya Basin.

*History of Education Series* – Consists of interviews on the history of education in Louisiana.

*Adrienne Lacour Series* – Contains fifteen interviews on the African-American community of Four Corners, Louisiana.

*Gillis Long Series* – Contains thirty-four interviews conducted by Dr. Gary-Huey for his biography of Gillis Long.

*McKinley High School Oral History Project* – Contains over 130 interviews with African Americans living in South Baton Rouge.

*Military Series* – Contains approximately sixty interviews with Louisiana veterans – mostly World War II veterans.

*Miscellaneous Series* – Contains over one hundred interviews on a variety of topics – includes interviews on the following topics: the Hanson's Disease Center at Carville, Louisiana; the insurance industry in Louisiana; family history and genealogy; New Llano, a socialist colony near Leesville, Louisiana; President Lyndon Baines Johnson, etc.

*Nuclear Age Series* – Contains twenty-seven interviews on America in the Nuclear Age conducted by LSU students as part of a class project.

*Political Interviews* – Contains interviews with ten Louisiana politicians.

*James Tracey Stakely Series* – Contains fourteen interviews on the work of landscape architect Steele Burden.

*University History Series* – Contains nearly 400 interviews on LSU History.

*Volunteers of America Series* – contains ten interviews on the history of Volunteers of America in Baton Rouge.

*WJBO Series* – Contains ten interviews from Baton Rouge radio station's program "Topic."



**Recently Added Series:**

*Ecology, Economy, and Tourism in the Atchafalaya Basin Communities*  
*Ornithologist Illustrators*  
*Louisiana's Grassroots Women Environmentalists*  
*LSU Law School*  
*Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament*  
*International Acadian Festival*  
*Willie Fontenot Life Narrative*  
*Landscape Architecture*  
*Edible Histories: Food and Memory in Spanish-Speaking Louisiana*  
*St. James Place Retirement Community Resident Memoirs*  
*Brusly Centennial Oral History Project*  
*The Oakleigh Garden District, Mobile AL*  
*The Cajun Village Museum*  
*Hurricane Betsy Survivor Stories of the Lower 9, New Orleans, LA*  
*Alma Plantation*  
*Juke Joints and Honky-Tonks*  
*New Orleans Jewish Children's Home*  
*Hensche School of Painters*  
*Desk and Derrick Club*  
*Houma Indians*  
*Islenos Heritage Society*

**HOW TO ACCESS THE CENTER'S COLLECTIONS, PLEASE VISIT**

<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/> for information about LSU Libraries Special Collections  
<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/use.html>  
<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/dupl.html> for duplication procedures and fees

**CITATION FORMAT**

[Last Name, First Name], interview by [interviewer first name and last name], audiotape recording, [date], [4700.####]. Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.



## EQUIPMENT

### Digital Vs. Analog

Format	Pros	Cons
Reel-to-reel tape	Easy to repair, lifespan of 40 years or more	Equipment and blank tapes harder to find, no longer supported by manufacturers
Analog audiocassettes	Easy to find, relatively stable (lifespan of about 20 years), repairable although the process is more convoluted, equipment is easy to obtain and use	Hiss is transferred onto tapes when recording
Compact Discs (CDs)	Relatively stable and supported, CD players are readily available	Lifespan varies depending on brand, recordable CDs are easy to scratch and damage, recorded CDs are not always compatible with all CD players depending on age of player
Mini-Disc, DAT, Solid State, CD-R,	Easy to transfer audio from recorder to computer	Many unknowns related to stability, lifespan, and equipment support

	Pros	Cons
Analog	Supported by manufacturers over the long term, audio quality can be cleaned up, cheap and easily available, relatively easy to store, suitable for long term storage	Sound quality compromised to some degree, requires proper cooling for long terms storage, information must be transferred before medium decays, loss of quality from copy to copy
Digital	Easy to transfer audio from recorder to computer and to post or send over the Internet, easy to edit sound files on computer	Need computer and special software, not suitable for long term storage, becomes obsolete quickly, archiving requires a large investment in equipment and software (initial investment plus frequent upgrades), must be backed up frequently as computer failures can wipe out or corrupt files.





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## THE COST OF DOING ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is not a short cut or a cheap and easy way of doing research. Used to its full potential, done carefully and conscientiously, oral history methods let us collect unique information that can be of great value to researchers now and in the future. Done carelessly, without proper preparation and processing, it can result in evidence that is superficial, anecdotal, little better than hearsay and too often inaccessible. Doing oral history takes time and money. Each hour of tape recorded interview requires an average of twenty-five to thirty hours of preparation and processing. Our standard fee for contract projects is \$450 per hour of tape.

An explanation of the steps involved in doing oral history and a budget follows.

### **The Interviewer:**

The interviewer is expected to bring some professional expertise to the project, including a knowledge of the interviewee's career and field, the pertinent sources for further information on these subjects, and the questions that should be asked. If he is not an experienced interviewer, then he is expected to attend one of my training sessions. Prior to the interview, he conducts background research in the written records in order to determine the topics and questions that need to be covered in the interview and to ensure that the oral history will not simply duplicate the written record but will supplement it, filling gaps and adding unique material available nowhere else. Once the interview is complete, the interviewer reviews the tape, making a list of the major topics covered, and noting topics and questions to be covered in subsequent sessions. He also reviews and corrects the transcript. For every hour of tape, the interviewer will spend five to ten hours preparing for and reviewing the interview.

### **Transcribing and Processing:**

It takes an experienced transcriber six to twelve hours per hour of tape to produce a verbatim transcript. Once the transcript is complete, it is checked against the tape by someone other than the transcriber to ensure accuracy. This is an essential step since even the most conscientious transcriber will make mistakes or be unable to hear or understand some portions of the tape that may be clearer to a second listener. This process, called auditing, takes three to five hours per hour of tape; correcting the transcript adds another two to three hours. The corrected transcript is sent to the interviewer and interviewee for their review and corrections. The interviewee is asked to make changes for accuracy and clarity only, not to edit for literary quality. Once the interviewer and interviewee have returned their copies of the transcript it receives a final editing. Punctuation and



paragraphing are imposed as necessary, false starts are eliminated, and minimal editing is done to promote clarity and readability. This process, along with making the corrections

suggested by the interviewer and interviewee, takes another five to eight hours per hour of tape. We then make an abstract or index of the interview and two bound copies, one for the interviewee and one to be deposited in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections where it will be available to researchers.

Transcribing and processing the interview thus can take fifteen to thirty hours per hour of tape. To this must be added overhead costs--equipment, supplies, phone, postage, and general supervision and coordination.

### **BUDGET FOR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

Per hour of tape

Interviewer	\$150
Transcribing	100
Auditing	80
Editing	70
Abstracting	50
Overhead	100
Total	\$550
Preservation, if born digital	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$600</b>



## WEB SITES

### **T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History**

<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/oh/newsite/ohindex.html>

### **LSU's Digital Library – The African-American Experience at LSU (click on “collections to get to the interviews)**

<http://appl005.lsu.edu/LSUDL/index.htm>

### **Tips for Interviewers**

<http://www.lib.berkely.edu/BANC/ROHO/rohotips.html>

<http://www.indiana.edu/~ohrc/pamph1.htm>

[http://www.baylor.edu/~Oral\\_History/Welcome.html](http://www.baylor.edu/~Oral_History/Welcome.html)

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/sohp/info.html>

### **Oral history Projects – High School**

“What did you do in the war, Grandma?”

[http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII\\_Women/WomenInWWII.html](http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII_Women/WomenInWWII.html)

“The Whole World Was Watching: An Oral History”

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968>

“We Made Do – Recalling the Great Depression”

<http://ipad.mcsc.k12.in.us/mhs/social/madedo>

“Bland County History Archives”

<http://www.bland.k12.va.us/bland/rocky/gap.html>

### **Other Oral History Resources**

“History Matters”

<http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu>

“Rutgers Oral History Archive of World War II”

<http://history.rutgers.edu/oralhistory/orlhom.htm>

“Using Oral History – Lesson Overview” [Library of Congress]

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/oralhist/ohhome.html>

“Civil Rights Oral History Bibliography”

<http://www-dept.usm.edu/~mcrohb/>



"Suffragists Oral History Project"

<http://library.berkeley.edu/BANC/ROHO/online/suffragists.html>

"Oral History Project – Miners Memories of Cumberland Coal Mining"

<http://www.haig1.freemove.co.uk/page47.html>

"Harry S. Truman Library & Museum"

<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/index.html>

"May 4<sup>th</sup> Oral History Project 2000" (Kent State)

<http://www.library.kent.edu/exhibits/4may70/ohproject.html>

"Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum"

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/biography.asp>

"Southern Oral History Program"

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/sohp/sohp.html>

"Kellytown Oral History"

<http://minticello.avenue.gen.va.us/Community/Neighborhoods/Kellytown/History/>

"US History Immigration Theme"

<http://www.davison.k12.mi.us/academic/impage.htm>

"Using Primary Sources in the Classroom: Civil Rights Movement Unit"

<http://www.archives.state.al.us/teacher/rights.html>

"United States History Lesson Plans"

<http://www.orangeschools.org/ohs/teacher/TJordan/Pages/lessonsii.html>

"DiscoverySchool.com"

<http://school.discovery.com/schoolhome.html>

"National Archives and Records Administration – Primary Sources for the Classroom"

<http://www.nara.gov/education/teaching/>

"The History Place"

<http://www.historyplace.com/>



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